



University
of Glasgow

Brennan, Claire Josephine (1996) *Sylvia Plath - the woman and her time: an intertextual approach*. PhD thesis.

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/74339/>

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>
research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk

**SYLVIA PLATH - THE WOMAN AND HER TIME:
AN INTERTEXTUAL APPROACH**

Claire Josephine Brennan

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English Literature
University of Glasgow

December 1996

© Claire J Brennan 1996

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my supervisor Professor Philip Hobsbaum for his critical commentary and guidance over the last three years.

I am grateful to the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for their financial assistance during the first two years of my research, and also the University of Glasgow for the award of a Postgraduate Scholarship for my final year of study. I wish to thank the University of Indiana, Bloomington for the award of an Everett Helm Visiting Fellowship enabling me to visit the Sylvia Plath Manuscript Collection in the Lilly Library, and also the Sylvia Plath collection at Smith College. Thanks is extended to the librarians for both collections for their help and advice.

Thanks also to Dr Jane Goldman for her initial encouragement.

Abstract

Criticism of Sylvia Plath's writing has tended to privilege her personal history over the social and historical context that to a large extent constructs the personal. This thesis is concerned with placing the writing of Plath within its social and historical context, and aims to illustrate, through considering the process of the construction of self through society, the extent to which Plath's writing is involved with an era. Recent discussions considering Plath from a feminist perspective have concentrated on the expression of a woman's consciousness which arises from a sexualized, gendered conflict. While these discussions are relevant to this thesis, I argue for a more contextualized view of Plath's writing which insists on reading the conflicts and tensions of the writing as consistent with specific historical and social pressures.

As an introduction to considering the way in which a self is constructed in Plath's writing, this thesis briefly considers the way in which Plath has been created by her biographers. This chapter reflects the critical response to Plath's work. The second chapter "'My Emulous Urge': American Women's Magazines" begins to engage with the idea of intertextuality and explores the relationship between Plath's writing and women's magazines. By considering Plath's involvement, both as a reader and as a young publisher, the styling, format and ideology is seen to influence aspects of Plath's writing. Initially prepared to construct a social self through the prescriptions of the magazines, Plath's writing undertakes a process of self

construction which struggles with compliance and redefinition. This is considered in relation to the iconography of the female self.

The third chapter 'The Domestic State: Personal and Political', discusses the domestic context of much of Plath's writing, suggesting the significance of place and era in the consideration of mothering. Parallels are drawn between the isolated, inner worlds of the housewife, and the tensions generated by the American politics of the Cold War. Through figures such as Dr Spock, Ethel Rosenberg and J Edgar Hoover, Plath's writing can be seen to be imbued with fears and strictures of the time. This is further developed to consider the role of hospitalization in Plath's writing, which is seen as part of the social conditioning of women in this era. The final chapter to consider Plath's own awareness of context, 'Waist-deep in History', considers the struggle for the articulation of a historical self in relation to historical events of the twentieth century. The impact of the Holocaust is considered in both an American and European context, finally suggesting that a historically sensitive and political voice is evident in Plath's writing.

In conclusion, it has seemed important to recognize the contextualisation of Plath by other writers, in particular the generation of American writers who share a past with Plath, but who are able to discuss the present.

Abbreviations

LL Sylvia Plath Manuscript Collection,
 Neilson Rare Book Room,
 Lilly Library,
 Indiana University,
 Bloomington, Indiana

Smith Sylvia Plath Collection,
 Ruth Mortimer Rare Book Room,
 Smith College,
 Northampton, Massachusetts

Contents

Introduction	1
1 The Biographical Pursuit	23
2 'My Emulous Urge': American Women's Magazines	66
I 'Star of the Campus': Initial Success	66
II Becoming a Woman	101
III Figuratively Speaking	166
3 The Domestic State: Personal and Political	180
I Hoover: An Appliance and a Presence	180
II A Discourse on Mothering	216
III Medicalization: A Critical Position	265
4 Waist-deep in History	288
5 Claiming a Contemporary	358
6 Bibliography	382

Introduction

Yella, Yella, Catch A Fella!
 it's quick...easy...fun...with Swan's Down Golden
 Yellow Cake Mix (*Seventeen* 1953b:14)

This jingle from 1953 now sounds like a curiosity, its admittedly self-conscious kitsch nevertheless naively unaware of the ideological implications of its advice. It is often easy to dismiss the societal impact contained within these innocuous rhymes, aspects of women's lives not contained within legislation but engaged with popular culture and society. Often hidden within the intimacies and minutiae of womens' lives is a measure of their societal position and worth. In 1953, this revolved around the domestic, the position from which women's creativity must be defined.

From popular music to politics, the 1960s is generally accepted as blossoming during 1963, producing changes which profoundly altered society. The 1950s and the dawning of the 1960s became increasingly distant in the values and expectations these years represented. Yet, since it is such recent history, firmly within memory, the decade is often not fully contextualized nor recognized as a historical moment which cannot be absorbed into discussions of a modern consciousness. The 1950s occupies a pivotal position in this century, often representing a position of stasis from which a modern consciousness develops. In relation to society, this era must be recognized as history, and as such, be read as a text in

relation to literature. While it could be argued that this has been recognised when considering texts which embrace a social commentary, such as Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*, texts which are perhaps restricted by their awareness of era, a fuller consideration of the impact of history on other writers has been neglected.

Sylvia Plath's work is inadequately contextualized; the depth of cultural involvement in her writing is neglected in favour of a focus on the personal. Yet, as this thesis argues, Plath's work is deeply involved with and influenced by the decade in which she wrote. From her complete body of writing, *The Bell Jar*, the short stories, the poetry, the magazine stories and articles, the children's fiction, emerges a consciousness which is shaped, defined, and occasionally limited, by the historical moment. If Plath's writing is read within a societal context much of the obsessively personal criticism which limits interpretation to an egotistical centre is necessarily radically modified in the course of a critical move away from a poetry of personality to a recognition of the inclusive nature of Plath's work. Plath's writing is exceedingly more informed and political than has previously been recognized. For Plath's work to become fully understood, to become engaged with critical debate, it must disengage from the personal by going through a historical process of interpretation, defining her as a social and historical writer. The emergence of Plath as a culturally involved writer is not offered as a conclusive position; but as a freer position from which to interpret her writing.

Prior to defining the argument of this thesis, it is useful to explain the use of 'intertexts' and 'intertextuality'. In 'Word,

dialogue, and novel', an article first published in 1969, Julia Kristeva introduced the terminology of intertextuality:

[...] horizontal axis (subject-addresse) and vertical axis (text-context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin's work, these two axes, which he calls dialogue and ambivalence, are not clearly distinguished. Yet what appears as a lack of rigor is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed by a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*. (1980:66)

Kristeva seems to concentrate her thesis on the specificity of text, the interaction of literary texts in the construction of another. She further explains:

The word as minimal textual unit thus turns out to occupy the status of *mediator*, linking structural models to cultural (historical) environment, as well as that of *regulator*, controlling mutations from diachrony to synchrony, i.e., to literary structure. (1980:66)

Kristeva also suggests some movement outside the literary structure to consider the influence of cultural environment on the text, since we read the cultural environment itself as text.

Her term 'intertextuality' subsequently gained immense popularity in literary theory, becoming detached from the precise inscription of Kristeva to occupy a more general position.

This thesis engages with intertextuality in several forms. Plath's work is read as a complex body of work, often enclosing opposing or conflicting consciousness, yet remaining cohesive. Relationships between opposing genres can be identified, contributing to a holistic approach to the texts; rather than insisting on a fragmentation of consciousness, Plath's work, through an awareness of society, is seen satisfactorily to contain its contradictions. This is not to isolate Plath's writing from other textual sources; in this thesis, an effort is made to contextualize Plath's writing in relation to contemporary authors where appropriate. However, the central focus is on a relationship between culture and literature, interacting with intertexts of a social, domestic and historical nature. This, itself, involves textual material, such as women's magazines, but it also insists on reading society and history as textual material. As Michael Worton and Judith Still recognize in relation to their own volume:

[...] text is used both in the restricted academic sense to mean 'a work of literature' and in the wider sense to mean anything which can be perceived as 'a signifying structure' from *the spectacle of nature* to *social codes*.
(1990:viii)

The intention is to define Plath's position within a historical context, and to recognize this engagement as positioned within society.

The relationship between society and literature is problematic for many reasons. Initially, it is difficult to determine a coherent notion of the prevailing society: society is necessarily plural. In an attempt to contextualize Plath I offer versions of American culture drawn from various historical and sociological sources including women's magazines of the relevant period. But the central problem concerns the way in which this material is relevant to an understanding of literature and the author. A complex relationship exists between the individual and ideology which raises questions of influence and determinism. In an Inaugural Lecture delivered before Oxford University Terry Eagleton claimed that:

[...] works of art are not born of previous works of art; they have a much less distinguished parentage, [...] and that is material history. (Eagleton 1993:14)

Yet even if this premise is accepted, understanding the ways in which history and literature connect remains problematic. This thesis attempts to consider the way in which Plath negotiates historical and cultural forces, and the relationship between text and context, the individual and ideology. Stan Smith states that: '[...] all poetry, at its deepest levels, is structured by the precise historical experience from which it emerged.' (Smith 1982:8) He believes that Plath's 'Holocaust' poetry is referential and directly introduces a historical self. Smith

focuses mainly on poems like 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' which clearly invoke history but it also seems important to consider the way in which Plath's less overtly politicised poetry relates to a societal and gendered context. And this process involves situating her all of her writing within wider social and political contexts. Often it is possible to show that the social and political have fairly direct effects on Plath's writing but in many cases my method is rather to parallel text and society: I recreate the dominant cultural beliefs from political and domestic spheres and read Plath's poetry in the light of these imaginative recreations. The thesis then works cumulatively, moving for example from the figures of the Rosenbergs to the feelings of paranoia in Plath's writing. The transitions from context to text and back again work with varying degrees of smoothness, but it seemed in the end to be a bonus that the very openness and unevenness of the relationships I discuss stimulated new possibilities of reading. This exercise, then, attempts to recognise Plath within culture, freeing her writing from the restraints of the individual as case study, but retaining the notion of the individual within historical time.

The central section of the thesis engages then with the ways in which Plath is herself constructed by history and with how she constructs a historicised consciousness in her writing. But it seemed necessary initially to free the discussion from the biographical stranglehold on Plath's work. The critique of Plathian biographical discourses in the opening chapter is thus intended to undermine much existing critical discussion of Plath. I discuss this against a backdrop of feminist biographical discussion and more inventive approaches. Nancy Mitford's

study of Zelda Fitzgerald, and Adrienne Rich's and Sandra Gilbert's articles on Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath respectively, seem to progress towards a necessarily more inclusive interpretation of women's histories; lives which are perhaps not supported by society's conventional structures, and thus cannot be read through them. Plath's biographies, mostly written in the last ten years, reveal the continual pursuit of the specific and the personal in her writing and life. The misogynist paternalism of Edward Butscher, the confictions of Anne Stevenson and Linda Wagner-Martin, the fictionalizing and screen-play writing of Ronald Hayman and Paul Alexander, are all shown to produce distorted texts while revealing the impossibility of producing the definitive narrative. These studies pursue a specific consciousness at the expense of recognizing a shared consciousness, thus reading Plath's life in a cultural vacuum, reflecting and encouraging the restraints of much Plath criticism and debate.

Having defined the limits and constraints adhered to in the interpretations of Plath's life and work as a matter of construction, the second chapter, "'My Emulous Urge': American Women's Magazines" begins to undertake the process of contextualization. In the opening section, 'Star of the Campus: Initial Success', there is a recognition and justification of the importance of women's magazines in women's lives, both in their relationship with the reader and as a signifier of women's position in society. While in modern discourse there is a slightly indulgent, perhaps even nostalgic, approach towards women's magazines, there needs to be an acknowledgment of their much more insidious and even controlling influence in the

1950s. By comparing Plath's approach and involvement with women's magazines to that of her literary contemporaries, Penelope Mortimer and Denise Levertov, a relationship unique to literary circles yet common to the magazines' readership, can be seen to evolve. Plath is consumed and seduced by the magazines, at times believing their fantasy and the constructions of womanhood they offer. It is this basis of engagement and compliance which sustains a discourse between Plath's writing and the magazine ethos. Although Plath's work develops to exploit, parody, scorn and even ridicule the fantasy, she is never fully dismissive of the societal self represented and prescribed. Plath, surely part of a pre-feminist legacy, subverts the fantasy while recognizing its power and ultimate attraction.

The connection between Plath's work and women's magazines is primarily explored through an analysis of the images and text of the magazines. I have concentrated on three American women's magazines with which Plath sustained an intimacy, *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. The relationship is considered through an exploration of her early publishing achievements in the medium, primarily *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle* prize winning short stories, in the section titled 'Star of the Campus: Initial Successes'. Close reading of stories such as 'Initiation' and 'Sunday and the Mintons', develops an analysis of Plath's conformity and subversion; while also sustaining an argument for a complete approach to Plath's writing which does not exclude 'juvenile' prose but argues for its merits in defining the work. This is further pursued by recognizing Plath's complete absorption by

the magazines when she becomes guest assistant-editor for *Mademoiselle* in June 1953. While this is specifically a biographical detail, it is not intended as a resort to biography. By considering Plath's intense involvement with women's magazine culture, I suggest that we can see how Plath is both implicated in and resistant to the ideology of the magazines. An examination of the images and texts of women's magazines provides a perspective from which Plath's writing can be seen as emerging from the recognition of a societal self. These issues are seen to be articulated within *The Bell Jar*, commenting on the role of women within a limited society.

The second section of this chapter, 'Becoming a Woman', begins to approach the relationship between Plath's writing and women's magazines in a more suggestive and imagistic way. By considering the images and texts of women's magazines, Plath's writing can often be seen to be emerging from the recognition of a societal self. This is immediately seen through the representation of women's relationships with men; firstly, a consideration of the position of the father, followed by an awareness of objectification, both by men and the self. A large section of this discussion considers the implications of the magazines' ideal woman. By centrally considering the writing of Laura Mulvey, the complexities of the gaze are explored through the magazines and Plath's writing, both in prose, 'The Wishing Box', and more confrontational poetry such as 'Lady Lazarus', suggesting a connection between the difficulty of accepting and articulating subjectivity.

The idea of the perfected woman is continued in a discussion of female duality, a concept which is shown to be

generated by the women's popular press, both through advertising and editorials. It is argued that this prevailing cultural notion is evident in Plath's poetry, such as 'Strumpet Song', 'Lorelei' and 'The Rival'. By its negotiations with the fears and difficulties of a particular era Plath's poetry demonstrates the difficulty of defining a female consciousness in a given society. This is further developed by the concentration on the doll-like, mannequin woman, an image which dominates the women's magazines, and is seen to be parodied in Plath's poem 'The Applicant', a poem which deflates the commercialization of women.

Connected to the idea of a mannequin woman is the increasing concentration on the perfection of the physical women, primarily through cosmetics and dieting, an area which expands through the 1950s. The physical alteration of women generates a rhetoric of rebirth and reemergence, a need to reinvent the physical self to provide an acceptable social self. This pressure is found throughout Plath's work, both in an explicit, specific form such as 'Face Lift', and as a general undercurrent of female definition, such as 'Three Women'.

The concentration on a societal self centred around the perfected woman in the magazines, is revealed to be at the centre of women's relationships through the representation of mothers and daughters. This relationship is seen to be a determined continuation of femininity, creating an often claustrophobic, demanding dialogue of expectation, generating anxieties which are often found in Plath's writing concerning the position of daughter. Through this discussion of the magazines' construction of a societal self, the pressures and

anxieties of Plath's writing can be seen to be emerging from a cultural position.

In the final section 'Figuratively Speaking', the female body is revealed to be present yet coded and denied within popular discourse. Advertisers and editorials concentrate on hygiene to the extent that it becomes an obsession which disguises a fear of physicality. Plath confronts this sanitization of the body through an explicit physicality, which often becomes a revulsion, in her writing. Plath's work contains a 'blood flood' which counters popular ideas of a female self. Plath's discourse with women's magazines invites a discussion of the relationship between this inner feminine world and the position of women within a domestic world which is often governed and influenced by a wider agenda. Towards the end of the second chapter the idea of duty and position is introduced through 'Lesbos' as Plath's work not only parodies the conventional, but questions and disrupts the conventional as her work engages with expressions of domestic pressure.

'The Domestic State: Personal and Political' discusses the relationship between Plath's writing and the perception of women within their domestic expectations. The women's magazines present an insular, at times isolated, perspective, often disengaged from a larger society. In Plath's work which is contextualized specifically within the domestic, there is a consciousness which can be seen to absorb the pressures and restrictions on women's lives which are emerging from a prescriptive American society. The demands and limitations of a Cold War atmosphere can be seen to create a national consciousness which is reflected in Plath's writing through the

position of mother, and culminates in the pervasive theme of institutionalization.

As a background to exploring these issues in Plath's writing, I initially discuss the political background of the 1950s, a time dominated by fears for national security, in the section headed 'Hoover: An Appliance and a Presence'. The House Un-American Activities Committee's trials in Hollywood and the discussion of the Cold War in the women's press are seen to domesticate an understanding of a political threat. The conviction of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg is identified as a defining moment of fear and paranoia, as the threat is seen to have significantly emerged from the household. The figure of Ethel Rosenberg is particularly potent; as a woman and an American housewife, she complicates an understanding of the dominant female image introducing ideas of the bad mother, a fear which becomes progressively exploited through the decade. These fears are combined with a persuasive rhetoric of the enemy within; the threat which appears increasingly familiar and domestic within the American consciousness. As part of the social background to this chapter, it also seems necessary to define Plath as essentially an American contextualized writer.

Plath's poetry encapsulates the strain between overtly domestic, personal situations and a submerged political and social resonance. Suggestions of secrecy and suspicion emerge from poetry such as 'The Detective'. More importantly, poems such as 'The Tour', 'Eavesdropper' and 'The Bee Meeting' can be read as fully contextualized within a social moment as Plath's work engages with a national consciousness. These poems also

lend themselves to a medical reading. Discussion of this possible reading is greatly helped by Carol Warren's study *Madwives*, and will be returned to in the third section of this chapter, 'Medicalization: A Critical Position'.

While a female consciousness is central to this discussion, the self represented in Plath's writing can be specifically read as a wife and mother in section two, 'Baby and Child Care: A Mother's Manifesto?'. This discussion requires further contextual positioning with reference to the representation of housewives in popular culture, the position of the mother within the American constitution, and centrally, the overwhelming influence of Dr. Benjamin Spock. Even endorsed by President Kennedy, Spock is integral to an understanding of the expectations of American mothers. *Baby and Child Care* is seen to prescribe notions of national security and responsibility through the role of the mother, and this is part of a rhetoric embedded in women and further illustrated by Adlai Stevenson's commencement speech at Plath's graduation from Smith.

Plath's poetry written from the perspective of the mother is often read sympathetically by critics who concentrate on poems such as 'You're' and 'Morning Song'. This focus seems to arise from a fear of unpleasant biographical revelations. However, if Plath's work is considered in relation to the era's concept of mothering, and read with an awareness of the pressures and expectations placed on mothers in general, feelings of frustration, which border on resentment, are often found to be articulated. Even from the outsider's position, in *The Bell Jar* and 'The Babysitters', a more complex mother and

child relationship is expressed than is conventionally recognized. 'Morning Song' incorporates feelings of estrangement within the mother's expression of love, and 'Balloons' can be seen to articulate the collapse and resignation of many women.

Plath's work is not restricted to comforting images of mothers, and often expresses a rage arising from the mothering role. In 'An Appearance' and 'Event', tension is focused on the child who is no longer a benign presence but an agitation. The fantasy of 'Stopped Dead' is violently expressed within the frustration of mothering. The contradictory placement of mothers at the centre of political ideology yet absent from discussion and opinion, leads to a submergence and partial expression of political fear within the domestic, reflecting the struggle for the social expression of women within the 1950s. This is evident in 'Lesbos' which contains the tension between functioning in the domestic context, while feeling weighted by a social consciousness. These feelings can be seen to emerge from the concentrated exclusivity of mothering in the decade, and also to begin to enclose women within a medical realm.

Section three 'Medicalization: A Critical Position' discusses the progression of the domestic poetry into the hospital ward. A theme throughout this chapter, the medicalization of women relates to many issues of the decade, encapsulating fear, suspicion and the control of women. Poems such as 'Three Women' and 'Tulips' are seen to explore the hospitalization of women, and if read within a specific historical context, reveal links with the perception and treatment of mental illness. By considering Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, the rhetoric of

women's experience of hospitalization becomes relevant to a political discourse of invasion and infection related to the body. These issues correspond to the consciousness of Plath's writing which is seen to parallel the medical position of women.

'Thalidomide' moves outside the exclusivity of the domestic yet is linked to this discussion through the expression of mothering. It is a poem which introduces an expansion of the domestic self into areas of social discussion, as Plath begins to define the self as relevant to a historical position. The domestic and political self becomes engaged in a commentary which is increasingly prescriptive and is obviously reverential towards the era. This chapter is primarily concerned with the reflection of the domestic self within Plath's writing, but this domestic self is often seen to be engaged with a struggle for a historical position; and Chapter Four 'Waist-deep in History', pursues this problem in Plath's writing.

'Waist-deep in History' initially discusses political statements and convictions which are found in Plath's personal, and often unpublished, writing. It must be recognized that although there are some powerful and committed statements from Plath, her apolitical position in life does arise from a national atmosphere. This hesitancy is found in Mitchell Goodman, the husband of Denise Levertov, when he describes what had been his reaction to the Korean War:

I was anguished about it, tossing about at night
wondering what to do, [...] but in those days Denise and I
were completely apolitical, we weren't involved in

anything, we were just two young and poor writers
struggling to continue writing. (Mitford 1969:30-31)

Goodman relates this apolitical attitude to the paranoia and repression of growing up during the Cold War:

Some of my class-mates were vaguely anti-war, but there was a pall on serious political discussion in those days of the McCarthy repression for fear of some sort of unnamed reprisal by the authorities. (Mitford 1969:46)

Plath can be seen to share in this experience. While her letters and journals often express political opinions and fears, she remains outwith political engagement. It is this almost isolated position that complements the internalization of historical metaphor in Plath's poetry, a process she describes in her article 'Context'. Plath reveals a sensitivity towards political issues: indeed she insists that a historical consciousness is present within her work, though often at a submerged or figurative level.

The discussion of this aspect of Plath's poetry can be understood in three stages. Initially, Plath's writing reveals an oblique, even subliminal approach to the historical horrors of the twentieth century. Through metaphor, there is a residue of recurring meaning. The historical imagination verges on infiltration in some poems. 'Sculptor' is a poem incorporating historically suggestive images which shift the focus of the poem into a desire for testimony and remembrance. The prevalence of poisonous air and acids in Plath's poetry suggests a constant

awareness of a historical imagination, engaging with a contemporary rhetoric. By considering the prevalent metaphors of holocaust writing and remembrances, both in Germany and Japan, images of the sky and ash are recurring fears which emerge throughout Plath's writing, often surfacing in an unusual or unsuspected context. These abstract historical references can be read as a result of the excluded position of women from history, a social position previously discussed.

In 'Getting There', which is structured around a train journey, a journey which has become imbued with meaning since the European Holocaust, there is an increasing awareness and consciousness of the metaphor. This leads into the second stage of understanding this relationship which is primarily concerned with the experience of memory, an area which Plath engages with in several ways. Female experience is increasingly placed in the centre of the metaphor, also reflected in 'Ariel'. The struggle and desire for memory is continued in the poetry, but with an increasing reference to historical actuality. In contrast to this movement, Plath also explores the dissolution of memory, the desire for amnesia in poems such as 'Insomniac', 'Amnesia', and 'Lyonesse'. It is significant that these poems appear to emerge from a masculine imperative, suggesting the gendered importance of Plath's position.

An engagement with historical reference also incorporates poems such as 'The Swarm' and 'Cut' which continue to respond to the idea of memory and history as a burden, the knowledge of history becoming a responsibility. 'Winter Trees', 'Letter in November' and 'Night Dances' all recognize the feelings of powerlessness which can arise from the burden of knowledge,

and it becomes an issue connected to maternity. From a sexualized perspective, 'The Munich Mannequins' confronts the inarticulateness of history from the displacement of women in history.

This discussion of the difficulty in aligning maternity to history feeds into the third section which begins to clarify the need to define a self within history, a position which develops from a gendered and national perspective. The collapse of communication in 'Little Fugue', the incomprehensiveness of 'Mystic', and the struggle for truth found in the early poem 'Bitter Strawberries' reveals a consciousness which is recognizably American, and one which is emerging from a social situation. These historical pressures become focused in the struggle to define a space within modern history.

The directly referential poems, such as 'Mary's Song', 'Fever 103' and 'Daddy', engage in a direct and immediate involvement with history. Like 'Brasilia', 'Mary's Song' places the understanding of maternity directly within a Holocaust landscape, conflating religious and historical imagery, yet women still appear to be on the margins of history, observers who resist being consumed by the imagery. In 'Fever 103', however, the consciousness is immersed within history; yet the historical self can only be explored through a point of reference, a connection to the domestic world which women almost forcibly inhabited. By highlighting the Japanese imagery and references of the poem, Plath forces an association between the self and the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a link which begins to further suggest a suppressed feeling of guilt and shame contained within an American consciousness.

These issues contribute towards a reading of 'Daddy' which recognizes the problems of representation and identification in the poem. The poetry reveals a consciousness which intertextually discusses two horrors, the European Holocaust, and the Japanese holocausts caused by the atom bomb. 'Daddy' seems to present a transference of perpetrator, and an American guilt is sublimated within a European landscape.

Plath's seeming appropriations in 'Daddy' is discussed briefly through the critiques of Jacqueline Rose and James E Young, but I suggest a further placement within a literary tradition. Plath's extremity of imagery is compared to Jane Austen's paralleling of the position of a governess with slavery in *Emma*, and Virginia Woolf's comparison between British patriarchy and fascism in *Three Guineas*. Plath can be seen to be part of a tradition of female expression, with the need for extremity when articulating within a marginal discourse. The consideration of Plath's specific historical moment, leads also to Alan Sinfield's recognition of the peremptoriness of Plath's writing. Prior to modern feminism, Plath's work can be seen to reflect the writing of Betty Friedan and Hannah Gavron, both sociologists limited by an as yet undetermined ideology. Plath can be seen to be personally and politically engaged in a debate on history within the limits of her decade.

The final chapter 'Claiming a Contemporary', moves from the idea of considering Plath within her social context to considering the construction of Plath within the emergence of modern feminism; an approach which arises out of the adoption of Plath by other writers. Initially I find it useful to consider the critical response to Plath's work in the seventies, noting

that this usually involved a discussion of Plath's life. As representative examples, Butscher's *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* and Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology* are considered. These studies seem to insist on reading Plath as an isolate, 'confessional' poet, removed from experience. It is feminist authors of the 1970s, writers such as Lisa Alther, Marilyn French and Erica Jong, who recognize Plath's position within literary history as belonging within a context; the context out of which these writers' works emerge. The references to women's magazines and thus 1950s ideology, reveal a contextual connection which is now expressed through a feminist awareness.

The presentation of Ginny as a teenager in Alther's *Kinflicks* reflects and parodies the pressures of Plath's era, engaging with the difficulty of defining a feminist consciousness when emerging from an era of femininity fever. The text echoes Plath's poetry, and contains the pressures of an atomic age and the insecurities of nation and self. The Plath references are few yet the novel relies on the recognition of a shared context.

Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* involves Plath's writing in an increasingly political discourse. It adopts a critical approach towards the 1950s, centering on the societal and cultural pressures placed on women, issues which are related to Plath's writing. French interprets Plath both through the pressures of the 1950s and the struggles of the 1970's, reading her work as both contextually engaged and prophetically feminist. The relationship which French suggests between the power structures of the Holocaust and the

relationships between men and women reflecting the adoption of 'Daddy' as a radical feminist text. *The Women's Room* contextualizes Plath's writing within a modern feminist consciousness.

Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* combines the approaches of Alther and French, approaches of literary foremother and signifier of the decade, with an absorption of Plath both as a writer and a woman so that she is a shadow over the text. Plath is mocked and adored, quoted and dismissed, yet she emerges as a figure through which to explore the boundaries between text and life. *Fear of Flying* does position itself as a cultural text, acknowledging a 1950s heritage which corresponds to Plath's writing, reflecting the fears and paranoia prevalent in the era. Yet Jong's text is not only a correspondence but a rescription of the fears and paranoias of Plath's writing, seen most clearly in the approach towards psychoanalysis. Jong reverses and deflates the 'Daddy' complex of analysis, thus removing Plath's writing from a contextual framework which wishes to limit understanding, into a contemporary perspective which recognizes the redundancy of these terms.

Thus I situate Plath's writing within the historical context which enabled the construction of a gendered consciousness and try to show the complex relationships of the individual female consciousness and the societal self. In a journal entry from 1958, Plath is seen to recognize the contradictions and limitations of her era in a critical tone of voice which is often ignored in her writing:

War is talked of again - Chinese communists, fareast
 news breaks in grimly. Moonshot rivalry, death sentence
 of Negro stealing \$1.95. How? Hatred, madness, bigotry.
 One cannot retreat. Miss America beauty pageant fashion
 chaos - three contestants wear same gown.
 (Sept 5 1958 Smith)

From the emptiness of women's magazines to the struggle for a
 historical definition, the female consciousness of the 1950s can
 be read with a specificity arising from these contradictions and
 pressures. The situation of women within contemporary
 society may seem far removed from the demands of the 1950s,
 yet any notion of post-feminism is somewhat undermined by
 the images currently attempting to attract young women. An
 advertisement for M&M's Mini Baking Bits, from *Seventeen's*
 fiftieth anniversary edition in October 1994, tells the story of
 Zack's seduction through cookies:

The key to a guy's heart. *It's food!* [...] Moral of the story?
 Bake your crush cookies with 'M&M's' Mini Baking Bits.
 You'll be *amazed* how he'll react.
 (*Seventeen* 1994:137)

The Biographical Pursuit

'Life has no plot' is one of my favorite lines. At least it has no plot while you're still living. And after you die, the plot is not your concern. (Jong 1978:277)

The relationship between autobiography and women's writing is involved in a discourse which attempts to redress the concept of women's fiction as incapable of expanding outside an introspective domestic experience. Feminist investigations of autobiography reappraise this concept by exploring the diversity of texts concerned with the self, the way in which these studies encounter issues concerning women's history; reflecting on the social relevance of the texts and how this reinstates women artists within the historical canon. There is, however, little consideration of the secondary text, the biography. The relationship which exists between biographies written about women and the perception of women in society reveals the way in which women are consciously reconstructed by an external perspective, embracing issues of objectification and ownership; raising issues surrounding the construction of self identity and consciousness; the interplay between themes of the self and the subsequent interpretation of the writer's self.

At the beginning of *Writing a Woman's Life*, Caroline G Heilbrun outlines the development of biographies written about women by women. The emergence of biography

discussing women is presented as part of an emerging feminist consciousness in literary studies which was attempting to redefine the canon and the position of women within it. Heilbrun suggests a connection between women's literary presentation and the social and cultural positioning of women, suggesting that the perspective of the biography is governed by an anticipated response. In highlighting Nancy Milford's biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, Heilbrun contextualizes Milford's work:

Only in 1970 were we ready to read not that Zelda had destroyed Fitzgerald, but Fitzgerald her: he had usurped her narrative. (1989:12)

To a reader of F Scott Fitzgerald's fiction, *Zelda Fitzgerald* may be a revelation. Milford subtly overturns the prevailing opinion that male authored fiction is a work of essential imagination by revealing the central inspiration of Zelda, from the original flapper to a casualty of the era. F Scott Fitzgerald can be seen to be fictionalizing the narrative of Zelda's life and her novel *Save Me The Waltz*. The biography reinvents the life of the Fitzgeralds from an alternative perspective revealing the extent to which biography can become an empowering genre, rescripting women's conventionally minor roles.

In the prologue to *Zelda Fitzgerald*, Nancy Milford relates Zelda's life and the writing of the biography to her own life and experiences. She begins:

When I was young and in the midwest and had
 dreams of my own, it seemed to me to be a fine thing
 to live as the Fitzgeralds had, [...] (1985: xii)

By situating the biography within an admission of the allure of myth and fantasy, Milford acknowledges her complicity and involvement within the text. In the prologue Milford positions herself within the text, claiming part of the narrative as her own. While this participatory style is not sustained throughout the biography, the portrayal of Zelda can be read through the perspective of the prologue. Her admitted involvement with and attraction to the subject becomes integral to the biography, reflecting on the way in which the subject is perceived; moving from an acceptance and even slight envy of the public figure, to a fuller knowledge and resulting empathy. This technique of participation unexpectedly relates to Leon Edel's *Literary Biography*, a study which reflects of the art of writing biographies along the lines of 'great men' and their life and work. While stressing the importance of factuality and the moral duty of the biographer, Edel states that the biographer:

[...] must read himself into the past; but he must also
 read that past into the present. (1957:1)

Milford approaches Zelda with an awareness of her era and position, revealing the central importance of contextualizing events in order to evaluate their relevance and provide a

perspective: to reflect on the relevance of past and present towards the understanding of an individual's life and era.

Adrienne Rich reflects this position; a desire to reclaim women writers from their own myths and reconstruct them from an empathic perspective. Rich's article, 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', is primarily a critical investigation of Dickinson's poetry which is, however, situated within a reflection on Dickinson's life and the relevance to subsequent women writers, including Rich herself:

For months, for years, for most of my life, I have been hovering like an insect against the screens of an existence which inhabited Amherst, Massachusetts, between 1830 and 1886. The methods, the exclusions, of Emily Dickinson's existence could not have been my own; yet more and more, as a woman poet finding my own methods, I have come to understand her necessities, could have been witness in her defense. (1979:99)

Rich adopts a poetic style, attempting to compose a relationship through an imaginary discourse of protectiveness and reinstatement. Rich respects the historical distance while attempting to engage with it, desiring to step outside her own consciousness and enter another by immersing herself in Dickinson's life:

Upstairs at last: I stand in the room which for Emily Dickinson was 'freedom' [...]. 'Matty: here's freedom,' I

hear her saying as I speed back to Boston along Route
91 [...]. (1979:101)

Rich expresses the difficulty of interpreting another life, the unavoidable incompleteness. She chooses to describe the process of research rather than attempt a conclusive result. Rich's personal, engaging style, offering an invented communication between two individuals, relies on the imagination: by figuring the physicality of Dickinson's life, Rich reconstructs the era with its restrictions and expectations.

Although Sylvia Plath has only qualified as a biographer's subject for thirty years, she has proved a lucrative investment. The discussions of Plath have been numerous and invasive, both personally and critically. Plath's life would appear to be well documented: five biographies are published, complemented by personal memoirs, in addition to the amount of critical discussion which involves biographical considerations; even granted a postmodern metabiography. From her childhood in Massachusetts to her death in London, the major and minor events of Plath's life are recorded and dissected, and yet there remains a sense of incompleteness.

Sandra M Gilbert's article 'A Fine, White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath' is a text which appears to bridge the biographical and the theoretical. The article begins as a form of memoir where Gilbert traces, from the age of thirteen, the intersections between her own life and Plath's, including a guest editorship at *Mademoiselle*:

As *The Bell Jar* suggests, we guest editors were on the whole nice, ambitious young women from colleges all over the country. [...] To complicate things further, for me and for Plath, there was the woman Plath calls Jay Cee, the editor with whom we worked every day. (1979: 246)

The experience is described in terms of connection and creativity. Gilbert proceeds to discuss the 'Plath Myth', relating it to her personal account:

[...] in justification both of my imagery and of my use of personal material that might otherwise seem irrelevant, I want to suggest that the whole story I have told so far conforms in its outlines to a mythological way of structuring female experience that has been useful to many women writers since the nineteenth century. In Plath's case the shape of the myth is discernible both in her work and in the life that necessitated that work. (1979: 248)

Gilbert transcribes the 1950s experience, the conformity and rigidity of women's lives, into a mythological framework. By relating Plath's life to her contemporaries, Gilbert attempts to acknowledge a context, an involvement in a shared culture through comparison and similarity illustrating how, in many ways, Plath belongs very much within her time.

Gilbert proceeds to discuss Plath's life as archetypal, how the Plath Myth:

[...] was of compelling interest to Plath's female readers because, like the stories told by Charlotte Brontë and Mary Shelley, it was figuratively if not literally the same old story. Disguised, perhaps, but the same. And our own. (1979:250)

The article does not however sufficiently separate a discussion of Plath's life and of her work as mythological constructs. The introduction appears to promise a cultural evaluation of Plath's life and how it affects her writing, but Gilbert then enters into a discussion which seems to support Newman's theory of Plath as a 'myth of herself'. (1970:48). While arguing that women writers mythologize themselves, and are complicit in the fantasy, Gilbert disappointingly complies with worn theories of a father obsession and a schizophrenic personality. Although this archetypal writing is associated with a female tradition of sublimation, relating to what Ellen Moers calls Female Gothic, in Gilbert's article there is a precarious division between myths which are superimposed and the suggestion that Plath produces the myths:

Out of the wax house of *Mademoiselle*, out of the mausoleum of the woman's body, out of the plaster of the past, these poems fly, pure and new as babies. Fly,

redeemed - even if their mother was not - into the
cauldron of morning. (1979: 259-60)

This image only helps to further mythologize Plath rather than deny the continual fictionalization of women writers; which, while perhaps adding to the public fascination with their writing, reduces any contextual and political dimension.

Plath is frequently discussed within a damaged coterie by means of gendered comparisons which defy cultural history. It is a common ploy among biographers and critics to parallel Plath's life with various other 'mad female writers', Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson being particularly favoured. Calvin Bedient describes Plath as '[...] our second queen (poor queen, mad queen) of subjectivity. The first of course was Emily Dickinson.' (1979:8). The queen imagery suggests the need for the qualification of a disturbing degree of 'oddness' in a 'great' woman writer.

Without investigating the lives of Woolf, Dickinson, the Brontës, and other female writers who are engulfed by myth, to read Plath within this tradition is bitterly ironic. Plath was aware of the stereotypes for women writers: the childless spinster; the bluestocking; the sickly infant; the overbearing lesbian. In a letter to her mother in 1956, Plath comments:

I shall be one of the few women poets in the world
who is fully a rejoicing woman, not a bitter or

frustrated or warped man-imitator, which ruins most of them in the end. (1975: 256)

Plath recognized the degradation of the eccentric woman writer and strove to avoid it. It is ironic that in her desire to escape the stereotype and the worn myths of the female writer, she inadvertently created a potent, contemporary equivalent. Marjorie Perloff in her article 'Icon of the Fifties' describes Plath as:

[...] hardly a feminist. Her letters are full of contemptuous references to 'spinsters' and 'bluestockings,' and she repeatedly insisted that her marriage came ahead of her career, [...]. (1985:282)

To a modern perspective, Plath's rejection of an academic life, her embracement of the demands of marriage and motherhood, seems to be a willful subordination of her talent. Yet Perloff ignores the factor of societal pressure, the era's adoration of the family and mother, when undertaking her contextualization of feminism.

The Plath Biographies

In turning from critics' interpretations to the assumed authority of the biographer, the fallacy of objectivity is the central problem in constructing a subject. Plath's treatment by her biographers illustrates the difficulties of an

essentially traditionalist approach, and reflects onto the problems which have developed in Plath criticism. The tendency to mythologize, and thus incarcerate, persists throughout the biographies: focusing exclusively on Plath, they deny the importance of historical and social contexts. Edward Butscher's *Sylvia Plath - Method and Madness*, published in 1976, is the first biography to appear. Butscher introduces his vision within a Freudian framework in the impressive opening line to chapter one:

For Sylvia Plath, as even the most casual reading of her poetry demonstrates, the central obsession from the beginning to the end of her life and career was her father, Professor Otto Emile Plath. (1976:3)

Butscher's sentence provides a perspective to be used through the biography, presenting Plath locked in patriarchal submission. The grandeur of Otto Plath's full name, including his academic title, contributes to the mythologizing of this relationship. Plath is often presented by biographers and critics as constructing a myth of her father, but here Butscher is complicit in the mythology to the extent that he is governing the process, illustrating the continuing desire for inadequate psychologizing of the father-daughter relationship:

As Sylvia developed a more specialized sexual consciousness and began to concentrate her feminine

attentions upon Otto, this also meant a more negative concept of her mother as a rival. (1976:11)

Butscher's Freudian fixation and the representation of these conflicts as consciously instigated, illustrates the extent to which a biography is determined by the era it is written in and by the biographer's often unacknowledged subjective interpretation.

In the preface, Butscher admits his mythological tendencies. Harold Fromm in his article 'Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist', acknowledges *Method and Madness* as a 'pioneering work' (1990:245). While criticizing Butscher's 'wildly excessive psychologizing' (1990:246), Fromm does not question some of Butscher's conclusions, stating that:

Butscher's thematic characterization of Plath as 'bitch goddess' was hardly wide of the mark. (1990:246)

In discussing biography, critics become embroiled in value judgments. Butscher admits that his 'appellation "bitch goddess"', which he uses to label Plath, may 'disconcert some readers' (1976:xi), yet explains his belief that it is a 'fitting description' by a clarification of the term:

The 'bitch', of course, is a familiar enough figure - a discontented, tense, frequently brilliant woman goaded into fury by her repressed or distorted status in a male society; and the 'goddess' conveys the opposite image, a more creative one, though it too

represents an extreme. As a combination, 'bitch goddess' has the additional advantage of a long metaphorical association - at least from the time of D. H. Lawrence - with fierce ambition and ruthless pursuit of success. (1976:xi-xii)

Butscher's psychoanalytic approach suffers from theories which are outdated and inherently misogynist, indicative of the Plath that Butscher constructs. The explanation of a 'bitch' as an ambitious woman restricted by a patriarchal society implicates the resulting frustration as the fault of the woman. The use of the antithetical 'goddess' creates a polarity with 'bitch', and the old 'whore/virgin' scenario is resurrected. Butscher suggests that Plath explosively combines these two elements, simultaneously creating a figure larger than life, while implying an inherent contrariness of women's sexuality and expression. This is evident from his assertion that the 'bitch' is 'a familiar enough figure'. 'Familiar enough' to whom?

It is significant that Butscher employs D. H. Lawrence to explicate Plath's nature. In her journals, Plath describes her reaction towards reading Lawrence:

Love, love: Why do I feel I would have known and loved Lawrence. How many women must feel this and be wrong! (1987:196)

Butscher seems to grant Plath her fantasy in his novelistic description of imagined tensions between her and Ted Hughes:

Being used to the rough folkways of Yorkshire, where farmers and mill hands accepted violence as a natural expression of the wildness all around them, he could not adapt with Sylvia's facility to the refined and frequently remote mores of an academic society generations removed from nature - at least not without rebelling from time to time. (1976:210)

This Lawrentian description of sophisticated woman and primitive man illustrates Butscher's tendency to fictionalize, adapting scripts from other texts, both novelistic and mythical. Hughes is cast as a rough Northerner, and Plath's attraction to him is introduced as a masochistic longing for brutality. This reveals the skewed psychoanalytic approach of Butscher, the tendency to interpret the life through the misperceived extremes of the poetry.

Butscher's psychoanalytic analysis becomes increasingly suspect, and reveals the way in which he insidiously positions himself within the text, establishing a reciprocal relationship between his own and an imagined Plath consciousness. When describing Plath's ocean journey to England, Butscher appears to be exhilarated by the assumed tragic romance of the situation:

Sylvia thrashed around in her narrow berth under the bodies of strangers because it seemed the sole available means of staving off despair, depression, another panic-stricken flight into madness and total negation. Sylvia is real here, and touching, pathetic, a lost little college girl wanting male strangers to reassert her illusions and dreams. (1976:167)

In the most pathetic presentation of Plath in *Method and Madness* Butscher first finds his 'real Plath'. The description of Plath as a little girl is extremely patronizing, tantamount to a provocative regression to childhood, and illustrates the paternalistic tone Butscher's biography adopts. Plath is perceived as a woman, or a little girl, who is misunderstood by all the men in her life; inviting an intimation that Butscher could have played these male roles much better. Butscher injects a sexual dimension into the text which incorporates the biographer.

The misogynist structure of the text seems to demand a complicity with the reader that affirms the essential alienation of women. Butscher assumes that Plath's experiences are outside those of the reader: the construction of a personal mythological identity, centrally the 'bitch-goddess', isolates and elevates Plath's life. He both implicates and excludes the female reader:

To make matters worse, the onset of her menstrual cycle in her pubescence was accompanied by cramps and an irregular, copious flow. Given Sylvia's sexual

confusion with reference to Otto, it is easy to get a picture of a tortured young girl who must have believed that the simple act of being a woman involved pain. (1976:34)

This statement is warped by a misogynist attitude: Butscher is an omniscient presence; his sexual and moral prefigurement looms over the text. Describing Plath's menstruation as traumatic suggests that this is extraneous, an experience alien to the reader, describing menstruation as though it were, to adopt an old phrase, a curse. His conclusion that there was 'sexual confusion with reference to Otto', encloses Plath's experience within a sexual family sphere. Butscher constructs Plath from an analysis of her poetry, finding sexual tension in poems such as 'The Colossus' and 'Daddy', and relates this to his hyperbolic descriptions of Plath's adolescence: purely subjective assumptions clothed in a voice of authority and objectivity.

The prospect of two further biographies of Plath in 1988 and 1989, inspired the hope of an approach which would redeem Butscher's glaring misconceptions of a female identity. Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath - A Biography*, was published in 1988, while Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* was published only a year later in 1989; the two writers concurrently researching their material. Consequently, much of what has been written about Wagner-Martin's biography was offered within the context of *Bitter Fame*. The two biographies appear to work together closely, the first constructing an image of Plath

which the second meticulously deconstructs and invalidates. Although antithetical in their outlook, the biographies can be read in conjunction; each an antidote to the other's faults. When discussing *Bitter Fame*, Stevenson's privileged position will be considered fully, but first it is relevant to compare her background to Wagner-Martin's.

In an article concerned with defending her position as literary agent for the Sylvia Plath Estate, Olwyn Hughes comments on her involvement with Butscher's and Wagner-Martin's biographies:

They claimed that I had attempted to suppress their brave revelations. All I had in fact done was request that if they could not properly substantiate their error-packed, invention-laden nonsenses (some of which were highly damaging to living people), would they please cut the offending passages. Much, by no means all, that Linda Wagner-Martin could not substantiate was cut by her editor. The earlier biographer, Edward Butscher, changed hardly a line. (1990: 62)

That Butscher did not receive any cooperation is perhaps understandable: yet the Estate did refuse to cooperate with Wagner-Martin while Anne Stevenson was assisted with *Bitter Fame*. The power of controlling information is a concern of Plath's poetry which seems to have persisted into the recording of her life. This opinion would no doubt induce Olwyn Hughes to feel that she is placed in 'the role of Machiavellian Manipulator of the Opus' (Hughes 1990:61),

but she did restrict one writer while assisting the other: a situation which encompasses the crude facts of discussing the biographical pursuit of Plath; the actuality of her life as a marketing and publishing business with Olwyn placed to protect the family interest.

Wagner-Martin was then writing from an outsider position. David Wood describes the treatment Wagner-Martin's biography received in a review by Stuart Sutherland:

In an eight paragraph review, Sutherland expends a whole paragraph bemoaning Wagner-Martin's Americanisms. In view of the fact that the biography is an American biography of an American poet by an American biographer, one eighth of the review might have been better spent on something a little more relevant to Plath's life and art. (1988:52)

It is amusing that the British literary establishment appears to have adopted Plath as British, becoming upset when she is placed within an American context and idiom. Yet, a realization of Plath's American perspective and context could offer a counter argument to the concentration on mythic interpretations which partly arise from her geographic displacement.

A central difference between Stevenson and Wagner-Martin is their perspective on location and nationality. Wagner-Martin has written extensively on modern and contemporary American writers. Although she has

published poetry, she is not, like Anne Stevenson, best known as a poet. She edited *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* and *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, so her position is one of editor and collector, perhaps even fan. In a review by Ian Hamilton, an insert is included to explain Wagner-Martin's reasons for undertaking a Plath biography:

[...] Indiana obtained a collection of Sylvia Plath's papers. At first it was academic fascination that led Ms Wagner-Martin to drive past cornfields to poke through the 3,324 items, ranging from school yearbooks to unpublished poems. 'But as I began looking at the material, it became clear there weren't many scholars using that collection,' she said [...]. After Smith College in Northampton, Mass., got other Plath papers in 1981, she decided it was time for a book drawing on both collections. (1987:12)

Wagner-Martin's credentials for researching and presenting Sylvia Plath appear promising: retaining the anonymity of the critic, her own biography consists mainly of her publications. With an academic background, Wagner-Martin perhaps represents the choice that Plath rejected after a promising teaching position at Smith. As Wagner-Martin lives a role that Plath rejected, she may tend to cast Plath's decisions as damaging. This is illustrated by the insistence on Plath's discomfort as an American in Britain, presenting Plath's life against a background of tension. Although this is convincingly shown as a strain in Plath's life, it appears to be the mainstay of Wagner-Martin's understanding.

Prior to the biography, Wagner-Martin published articles which seem to clarify her perception of Plath. In a review dating from 1983, she begins: 'Few people will read *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* without pain.' (Wagner 1983:521). Wagner-Martin approaches Plath with sympathy, and shows signs of a cultural historian's perspective when she states:

Entries are sometimes strained, and obsessively announce the cultural pressure on an unmarried, bright, attractive woman: [...] (Wagner 1983:521)

It is interesting to briefly compare the unquestioning trust in the presentation of truth displayed in Wagner-Martin's review, and Dee Horne's article 'Biography in Disguise: Sylvia Plath's Journals'. Horne claims that the published journals are as much an orchestrated construction of Plath as the biographies are, and is critical of the degree of editing:

[...] the major problem with this approach is that the reader does not see the author's version of her life, but rather that of the editors. (1992:93)

In contrast, Wagner-Martin accepts the woman revealed by the published journals; yet, remaining within these boundaries, she identifies points of tension arising from Plath's realization of herself within contemporary society.

In 1984, further pursuing this issue, Wagner-Martin published 'Plath's Ladies' Home Journal Syndrome'. By describing popular advertisements from women's magazines of

the era, Wagner-Martin attempts to create a sense of Plath's society which contributes to an understanding of the self:

The contradiction between Plath's being submerged in *The Ladies' Home Journal* - and trying repeatedly to write stories for the women's magazines - while she yet dreamed about being a great writer, living independently, traveling across Europe alone, is enough to have driven any mid-century woman to madness. (Wagner 1984b:37)

Wagner-Martin's article 'Sylvia Plath's Specialness in her Short Stories,' published in 1985, further highlights Wagner-Martin's central concerns in discussing Plath's work, which inevitably affect her understanding of the life. While admitting that some stories portray the woman as 'a classic over-achiever', in others:

[...] she is simply, and ambivalently, walking a path of her own. This fiction appears to provide a dimension of understanding about the way Sylvia Plath saw herself in life, a young woman writer at mid-century, a woman peripheral rather than central, and often confused about her direction. (Wagner 1985:2)

Plath's early short stories are often perceived to be juvenile and superficial, arising from her reliance on a magazine format. By investigating Plath's early short stories, Wagner-Martin identifies a mood of isolation perhaps arising less

from teenage angst than from a realization of the difficulty of constructing an identity as a woman writer. Wagner-Martin identifies a cultural pressure that Plath alternatively succumbed to and rebelled against. These articles clarify Wagner-Martin's intentions as a biographer, highlighting her central intention of examining the precariousness of Plath's often conflicting positions as a wife and a rival, a mother and a writer, an American poet and a British housewife.

Wagner-Martin states in her Preface that 'Plath was a feminist, in a broad sense of the term [...]' (1990:11). This appears to be a simplification of Plath, exposing Wagner-Martin as eager to impose an ideology on her subject. To read Plath's life with a feminist interpretation and understanding is justifiable, but to suggest that this understanding arose from Plath herself is to simplify the 1950s female psyche.

Plath is viewed as essentially American. Wagner-Martin suggests that Plath was looking forward to living in England when she and Hughes were returning from Boston, but:

Thoroughly American, Plath felt that agreeing to live in England was a kind of sacrifice on her part. (1990:168)

Plath's time in Britain is constructed as a period of rejection. Wagner-Martin positions herself within the text as an American woman, writing then with the focus that this necessitates. While at Cambridge, Plath was acquainted with the *Granta* crowd, yet in Wagner-Martin presentation, she was an outsider among Hughes's friends,

[...] Ted's friend's complained of Sylvia's association with the Granta crowd, although they did not know her personally. David Ross, the editor [of *St. Botolph's Review*], Daniel Weissbort, Luke Myers, and others told each other that Sylvia's writing was superficial. They belittled the appearance of her poems in American middle-brow journals. Male jealousy was part of the criticism. (1990:132)

Although Wagner-Martin concedes that the 'crowd's eventual welcoming of her [Plath] as a poet and friend' (1990:132), overcame the initial hostility, Plath is presented as an outsider within a closed, aggressively masculine community.

In addition to this, Wagner-Martin implies a suppressed competitiveness ingrained in Plath's and Hughes's careers. Susan Van Dyne recognizes 'Ted's more productive muse' and that Plath 'must have envied his output.' (1988:251). Wagner-Martin suggest that this contrast in productive creativity must have been heightened by their varying commercial success. Although Britain was first to publish *The Colossus*, Wagner-Martin stresses Plath's position as outside the dominant literary circles: while Plath was recognized as a promising, yet minor, poet, Hughes was embraced by the literary establishment:

Early in the summer [1960] Ted and Sylvia read their poems together at the Institute of Contemporary Arts

following the Faber & Faber cocktail party at which the photograph of 'Three Generations of Faber Poets' was taken: Ted Hughes with T S Eliot, W H Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender. (1990:178)

Wagner-Martin thus situates Plath as an outsider within a closed and insular literary establishment. Three generations of Faber poets perhaps merited, but did not admit, the inclusion of a woman. Either way, this would have been a daunting scenario to a young woman poet, especially while Hughes was being presented as a generational landmark: during his initial success absorbed into literary history. Wagner-Martin relates Plath's identity in Britain as peripheral, recognizing Plath's identity as an American writer to be part of her discomfort as a British housewife. By situating Plath's life within her own experiences, Wagner-Martin is attuned to recognizing British hostility towards Plath. This pressure persists throughout the biography and, while it contributes towards clarifying problems which Plath herself was aware of, it is a system which is ultimately limiting.

At the centre of Wagner-Martin's broadly feminist approach is the perception of Plath as a victim in a wider context. In a pre-feminist era, Plath was influenced by society's conventions and expectations. As seen in Wagner-Martin's articles, Plath is understood as a product of her society. If this concept had been expanded, for example if the details of Plath's life had been cross-referenced with former Smith contemporaries, along with the notion that

Plath was governed by her era, a sense of individuality would have emerged. However, the treatment of Plath as symbolic of women writers lacks a sense of direction and objective. By concentrating on tensions within Plath's marriage and career, as well as her position as an American, Wagner-Martin produces a generalized sympathy, failing to create Plath as an individual. Wagner-Martin is factual but her construction of Plath is rather flat; Butscher's assertion that Wagner-Martin 'is simply no match for Plath's ferocious aesthetic' (1990: 297) does appear to be partly true.

In contrast, Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* is expertly written with an authorial presence who is in control of the text: (of course, the central question is 'who is the actual omniscient author?'). Every incident is governed by the personality of an author constantly interpreting Plath's life. Yet, the biographer's desire for objectivity denies the unavoidable realization that the subject is a personal creation, necessarily an illusion. Anne Stevenson claims to provide an objective account:

[...] written with a view to confronting some of the misunderstandings generated by her meteoric rise to fame, replacing them, as far as possible, with an objective account of how this exceptionally gifted girl was hurled into poetry by a combination of biographical accident and inflexible ideals and ambitions. (1990:xi)

America but spending much of her adult life in Britain. Although their lives appear similar, through nationality and vocation, it is clear from Stevenson's interpretation and lack of empathy for Plath, that they respond to these givens in incompatible ways. (If the situation were reversed, it is questionable whether Plath would have written a more sympathetic biography of Stevenson.) In contrast to Plath, Stevenson can be seen to successfully adapt to a life in Britain. Yet her early adult life reveals that perhaps this integration was not so easy as is often portrayed. Stevenson writes of her own life:

I came to England to marry a childhood playmate [...]. Marriage, I thought, would be the culmination of my American success story. (1985:186)

This statement contains all the optimism initially felt by Plath, and sharply reveals the aspirations of the era. Stevenson's marriage, however,

[...] was not a success. We were both self-centred and ambitious; and society was shifting itself all around us. As for England, I scarcely saw it for my idealized picture of it. When I began to write, I had no language to express what I did not know. (1985:186)

Stevenson admits that the pressures of career and social changes contributed to the failure of her marriage. At this time, she also expresses discomfort with England, and

reveals what appears to be an outsider's position.
Stevenson's solution to this situation was:

I returned to America stripped of safety, early in the
1960s. (1985:186)

It is possible to imagine that Plath's solution to similar pressures was suicide. The tensions felt by Stevenson correspond to what it may be imagined was affecting Plath. In fact, Stevenson's solution supports Wagner-Martin's instincts for Plath's outsider position. Yet, in the changed environment of biography writing, and the perhaps mixed blessing of cooperation from the Plath Estate, Stevenson reveals little sympathy for Plath. But it can also be detected from the revelations of her own life that Stevenson harbours very little sympathy for herself. Her contempt towards a misjudged marriage and a romanticism towards England, results in a biography which does not sympathize with Plath's limitations. It is Stevenson's advantage to trivialize from a mature standpoint; able to frame Plath's life with her failure to succeed as an American woman. It is perhaps this English perspective, from an American woman who has successfully integrated herself within British culture, that favoured Stevenson with the literary estate.

Although Stevenson has expressed regret over her involvement with the Plath Estate, it should have enabled her to investigate beyond the edited versions of Plath's personal writing, a situation which she doesn't appear to take advantage of. She does, however, attempt to rescript

Plath's own words, privileging other's memoirs, raising the question of how the biographers order their sources of information, and consequently, how they construct a hierarchy of information. In an Author's Note at the beginning of *Bitter Fame* Stevenson acknowledges that '[...] a great deal of help from Olwyn Hughes, literary agent to the Estate of Sylvia Plath [...] have made it almost a work of dual authorship.' (1990: ix). Olwyn Hughes's involvement has been a matter of discussion, and perhaps regret, for Stevenson: the opening dedication certainly sounding like a disclaimer. However, when the biography was written it was in the context of cooperation, and so Olwyn Hughes was a discursive and active contributor to *Bitter Fame*. Olwyn Hughes, although largely absent from the text, is often the link which confirms and concludes an incident with a deprecating opinion of Plath. *Bitter Fame* is also written under the pressure of appendices by Lucas Myers, Dido Merwin and Richard Murphy. As Myers, Merwin and Murphy are already quoted extensively in the text, the appendices seem to be overkill.

In Stevenson's hierarchy of information, these opinions feature quite highly, questioning Plath's own words and actions: Plath is interpreted through a very closed, circumstantial framework which risks devaluing a sense of the individual by privileging the interpreted significance of events and incidents. Stevenson, by trusting the versions of contributors, introduces the question of memory; the text relying on a remembered past rather than Plath's recording of her present. There is a danger of dismissing Plath's

words, which although they may be revealed as half-truths or fabrications, still contain the 'truth' out of which her work was created. As Penelope Mortimer's heroine in *The Pumpkin Eater* reflects: 'Some of these things happened, and some were dreams. They are all true, as I understood truth. They are all real, as I understood reality.' (1987:158).

This point is illustrated by comparing the scripting of the events surrounding the 1960 CND Aldermaston march with Wagner-Martin's approach. After commenting on Plath's physical exhaustion and suspected postpartum depression following the birth of Frieda, Wagner-Martin briefly describes Plath's decision to attend the march (1990:175). In comparison, Stevenson provides a detailed account. By referring to Plath's letter to her mother of April 21 1960 in *Letters Home*, Stevenson includes Plath's recounting of the events:

Sylvia described the event in a tone of political concern: 'I saw the first of the 7-mile-long column appear [...]. I found myself weeping to see the tan, dusty marchers, knapsacks on their backs - Quakers and Catholics, Africans and whites, Algerians and French - 40 percent were London housewives. I felt proud that the baby's first real adventure should be as a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation. Already a certain percentage of unborn children are doomed by fallout and no one knows about the culminative effects of what is already poisoning the air and the sea. (1990:191)

Stevenson reveals, however, that the afternoon 'had not simply been the moving public occasion' (1990:192) described by Plath's letter. With a reliance on Dido Merwin's appendix 'Vessel of Wrath: A Memoir of Sylvia Plath', Stevenson, although conceding 'no doubt Sylvia did feel strongly about the march' (1990:192), discredits the motives and emotions expressed in Plath's letter. Stevenson's suggestion that Plath's actions were to punish Hughes is prompted by Merwin's comments on Plath's jealousy. It is Merwin's memory that prompts Stevenson to describe Plath's actions as 'punishment', to expose Plath's actions as a misguided belief that Hughes 'had given her just cause for "revenge"' (1990: 192), a trust revealing *Bitter Fame's* hierarchy of information.

Writers do not necessarily construct their own indices but they must surely take responsibility for them. It is thus interesting to consider the placement of this incident in Stevenson's index. Wagner-Martin's scanty information concerning the rally is listed under 'Hughes, Frieda Rebecca', and under Ted Hughes, in the collective entry covering their marriage. Stevenson's index is much more specific. The event is listed several times, under 'Merwin, Dido; and antinuclear march', and 'Plath, Sylvia' in the section 'and Ted Hughes', under the specific references of 'SP's jealousy and paranoia' and 'ban-the-bomb march'. It seems strange that the march is not referred to in the 'political views section' under 'Plath, Sylvia; personal characteristics and attitudes', although Stevenson's description of the incident does include

Plath's political sentiments in the letter to her mother. While Stevenson presents a more detailed exploration of the event it is employed to determine Plath's ulterior motives, which take precedence over her own report of the day. Stevenson manipulates the reader as part of the process of creating Plath as manipulative. The biography presents a clear notion of how Stevenson wishes Plath to be read, but her defining stamp on every incident can lead to a distanced presentation of the facts rather than an attempt to empathize with or understand Plath. Stevenson's treatment of *Letters Home* illustrates this point.

While critical readings of *Letters Home* vary from an inherent expression of matrophobia, to a complex system of disguise and self-deception, the letters are generally accepted as a text in which Plath constructed herself, created an image which would satisfy her mother. Stevenson notes the 'bubbling optimism' of the letters, describing them as 'effusive, gossipy, transparently naive outpourings' (1990:xiii). Stevenson uses a letter dated February 25, 1960 to demonstrate how 'assertions of calm self-sufficiency' in Plath's letter writing often disguised tension:

[...] Sylvia looked forward to giving birth and then 'living and writing in seclusion and skimming the cream off London periodically...Now we are "at home", London is a delight.' (1990:184)

Karen Payne, in her collection of letters between mothers and daughters *Between Ourselves*, observes: '[...] because a girl's mother is her most compelling model of womanhood and girls usually imagine that they will grow up to be like their mothers; when they don't, it often comes as an uncomfortable surprise to both sides and seems to call for an explanation.' (1983: xiv). Stevenson criticizes Plath's deception techniques without considering the wider implications of this relationship. Yet, when Plath's letters do express a tension and dissatisfaction, which in the letters to her mother is an important assertion of selfhood and separation, Stevenson appears to criticize her, reducing her feelings to 'curt remarks'. This hierarchy of information is employed by all the biographers to shape their material, but it is perhaps Stevenson that uses it most successfully, and, as in the above example, ruthlessly.

It is unfortunate that *Bitter Fame*, although more challenging than Wagner-Martin's work, suffers from excessive and unnecessary authorial intervention and a hierarchy of information which avoids an engagement with Plath's own words. In a final parallel, it is perhaps a coincidence that Wagner-Martin and Stevenson use the same image of Plath on their biography's covers. While Wagner-Martin's is an impressionistic drawing of a photograph of Plath, in a soft light and colours, the cover of *Bitter Fame* appears to retaliate with the actual photograph, a more direct yet unforgiving depiction; a darker mirror image of *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*.

It is remarkable that the accumulation of detailed analysis and debate through three biographies should be reduced to a slim volume. Ronald Hayman's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* contains all its motives in the choice of title. Plath's life is framed by the first and last chapters: 'The End of a Short Life' and 'Posthumous Life'. A composite of previously published material; employing biographies, memoirs and Plath's own writing, the biography is a work which borrows but does not evaluate. Hayman describes Plath's actions when the Wevills visited Devon:

She [Assia Wevill] was peeling potatoes in the kitchen when Sylvia, who was with David in the front room, heard Ted Hughes come in through the back door. Taking off her shoes in the corridor, Sylvia crept round to the kitchen where Ted Hughes was with Assia, but found they were only talking. (1992:157)

This is a speculation lifted straight from *Bitter Fame*, and one which is demonstrative of Stevenson's approach. Yet Hayman does not interrogate the tone, and thus avoids an engagement with questions about the biography's authenticity. Repetition becomes truth, and the central issue of investigative biography is diluted. A résumé of other material, this biography is merely a condensation, not an interrogation. Plath's life is predictably governed by a father obsession, a possessive mother, and a violent attraction to Hughes:

Knowingly and happily, she choose a man capable of physical violence; afterwards she drew it out of him, partly through provocation, direct and indirect, partly through mythicising him in both verse and prose. [...] To write like this is to acknowledge an appetite for violence, if not to invite it. (1992:88)

It is ironic that Hayman blames Plath's writing for influencing her life, considering the fixation that exists on the reverse. Hayman's drama of Plath's personal relationships, by borrowing attitudes and opinions from other writers, is a familiar enough coverage.

Within this disappointing cribbing of other people's research, Hayman does manage some perceptive observations. When discussing Otto Plath, he says:

Her father had taken great pride in the magical-seeming power he had over bees. They never stung him when he caught them. If Sylvia made her memories of him into a myth, it was he who most deliberately started the mythicising process. (1992:25)

This suggests the father's influence in implicitly constructing himself as a god-like figure, and a consideration of the daughter who is unable to reach a mature relationship with her father which would involve the necessary disillusionment, yet understanding. Hayman does not take this investigation further than a suggestion; perhaps because

he does not recognize the significance of this statement which negates the other biographers' plotting of Plath's mythological framework.

There are occasional insightful considerations of Plath within the text but, unlike the above example, they are largely concerned with the attention that Hayman grants to Plath's death. He discusses the role of antidepressants, highlighting the often negative effects. In contrast to the subtlety of the previous biographies, Hayman foregrounds the suicide, blatantly reading Plath's life with the final event cast over it, beginning with a description of the days leading up to and following Plath's death. The detail which Hayman grants to Plath's death contrasts with the other biographers who deal briefly and factually with Plath's suicide, yet all the biographers write the history of the life with the knowledge of a foregone conclusion, interpreting the life backwards from its final event.

An examination of Hayman's writing style reveals his preconceived idea of how he wishes the text to develop. In his book *In Search of J D Salinger*, Ian Hamilton admits that before he began the research he had already created his subject:

[...] I'd been dallying with the idea of Salinger; he was a fictional character, almost, and certainly a symbolic one, in the fable of American letters. (1989:7-8)

Hamilton recognizes the process through which Salinger becomes a fictional character; and his book is an exploration

of the extent to which Salinger is complicit in this. Hayman, however, creates Plath as a fictional character, developing and exploiting this technique. He describes the visit of Hughes and Alvarez to the undertakers:

With a ruff around its neck, the stiff body was in a coffin at the far end of a bare, draped room with a faint smell, like apples which were beginning to rot. The face was 'grey and slightly transparent, like wax.'
(1992:12)

Part of this section is clearly indicated as a quotation from Alvarez, rephrasing his impressions in *The Savage God*. This determines Hayman's exploitative style, both in textual construction and fictionalization. The writing is novelistic, particularly employing techniques of crime fiction by creating drama and suspense. Placing the suicide at the beginning of the biography, Hayman presents it as a mystery to be solved, consciously attempting to generate scandal by the device of raising unanswerable questions:

The autopsy report bizarrely states that Sylvia died on 11.2.63 and that her body was examined on 10.2.63.
(1992:12)

'Were they [house and car keys] found later?' Ted Hughes asked. Why did she have two sets, and why were keys uppermost in his mind? (1992:15)

Another unsolved mystery is about the letters to America. (1992:15)

Hayman inflates this catalogue of mistakes and confusions which may often surround a suicide, creating suspicion and hinting at a conspiracy theory by stating that: 'This book can neither answer all the questions it raises nor solve all the mysteries it investigates.' (1992:xix). Hayman exposes himself as eager to create a drama of novelistic proportions.

It is relevant to compare Hayman's biography with Jacqueline Rose's quite different study *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. As both were published in the same year, Rose is unable to comment on Hayman's biography, although his article in *The Independent*, which criticized Ted Hughes's maintenance of Plath's grave, is discussed as part of Rose's investigation of ownership. The two books are, however, linked since Rose inadvertently discusses the inevitability of Hayman's writing. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* partly investigates the Plath image which has risen out of her poetry; exploring the cultural understanding of this myth and fantasy, questioning the prejudices and misunderstandings which enabled this to happen. In the same year, Hayman's biography provides this reaction. A dead, young woman is placed at the centre of her own drama, and this frozen image becomes the emblem which prompts the unravelling. The inside cover of the hardback edition proclaims that:

Apart from the death of Marilyn Monroe - which is similarly surrounded by unsolved mysteries - no death in this century has taken a firmer hold on the public's imagination. (1991)

This statement appears premature: yet once Hayman has given Plath a Monroe make-over, it appears his objective. A comparison with Monroe is ironic since Plath's writing becomes critical of the society generating these images, although in a final irony this may have been a conclusion that Monroe also reached. Hayman turns Plath into a marketable commodity in a materialistic society she grew to distrust. Through this treatment of Plath as a cultural icon Hayman almost unknowingly reveals the relevance of this to the understanding of her writing.

In the same year as Hayman's biography is Paul Alexander's *Rough Magic*, at present only available in the United States. Published in 1991, *Rough Magic* reveals a journalistic approach to Plath; the material appears to be less suggestive of motive and diagnosis than previous biographies. Significantly, Alexander does not seem to interpret the life through the final event of suicide: the opening chapter begins with the imagined writing process of *Ariel*, seeming to offer a biography in awe of the talent. Alexander's concentration on Plath's creativity, however, fails due to the poverty of critical interpretation:

'Mystic' is a religious poem in which the narrator thinks about love and faith. 'Kindness' centers on a character

named Dame Kindness, a woman who drips with sweetness, although her intentions may not be so pleasant as they appear on the surface. (1991:322-323)

A narrative seems to be imposed onto the complexity of Plath's writing, a narrative which often resorts to the familiar biographical angle, especially on the prerequisite 'Daddy':

Speaking directly to her dead father, the poem's narrator admits that she had considered him to be godlike (the way Sylvia had once seen Ted) and accuses him of being a German Nazi. [...] Now the marriage has ended, and she's fed up. 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through,' reads the last line. (1991:299)

Rough Magic repeats the biographical claims of the other books, with more detail than the condensed attempt of Hayman. The most significant aspect of Alexander's text is the tendency towards a novelistic approach verging on the cinematic. The biography is related in frames, illustrated by the opening description of Court Green:

The landscape surrounding the country house in Devon lay dead, silent - typical for this hour of the early morning. [...] The main source of light, except for a scattering of stars, was a low moon which illuminated a clump of cherry trees growing on a knoll beside the house. In this darkness, all lines of demarcation faded; the whole scene appeared blurred, out of focus.

Similarly, the morning's stillness filled the interior of the house. In one upstairs bedroom, two small children, a girl not yet three and an infant boy ten months old, slept peacefully in their beds. Down the hall, in a room converted into a study, a young woman, the house's only other inhabitant, hunched at her desk. (1991:5)

The text begins within this crucial, cinematic moment, a scene which offers the emblems of Plath's life before zooming in on the central character. It is a life created from startling moments, framed in the sun of Winthrop to the gloom of London. Although Alexander does at least recognize the central point as creation rather than death, *Rough Magic* becomes part of an increasing commercialization and exploitation of the subject. The desire for new information results in hints and rumours:

But one reliable eyewitness account places her on the Queen Elizabeth II, sailing from America to England.
(1991:197)

This sighting involves an unidentified bodyguard figure, and a transatlantic journey for an abortion. Plath is presented as a tragic heroine in this biography, worthy of the grandness of the big screen. With the impending film of Plath's life, *Rough Magic* appears complicit in this process.

Janet Malcolm's 'metabiography' was heralded as incisive, intelligent and an antidote to the fictionalizing of Plath. A biography which explores the problems of biography through

the example of Plath, *The Silent Woman* discusses the difficulties of interpretation. Originally published in *The New Yorker*, it is a journalist's study which wraps its investigation in metaphors and analogies:

Biography can be likened to a book which has been scribbled in by an alien. After we die, our story passes into the hands of strangers. The biographer feels himself to be not a borrower but a new owner, who can mark and underline as he pleases. (1995:184)

Malcolm is interested in the players in the Plath biographical pursuit; concentrates on illustrating the capture and digestion of the writers and academics by placing herself in the frame. It is a readable documentary from the same stable as Ian Hamilton; accessible yet incisive, it ponders on the fate of the biographer and researcher at the admitted expense of the subject.

In conclusion, the biographers consistently fail to contextualize Plath's life, thus reading her experiences in a cultural vacuum. As an illustration of this, they fail to consider the context of Plath's psychiatric treatment. In *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830 - 1980*, Elaine Showalter discusses the representation of electrotherapy:

Following the iconographic conventions of the mesmerist and his subject, the vampire and his victim, Charcot and his hysteric, and the prison doctor and his

suffragette, the representation of shock treatment too makes use of archetypal patterns of masculine dominance and feminine submission. [...] Insofar as gender defines the positions in the scene, the electroshock patient is always 'feminine' - that is, even a male patient plays a feminine role. (1993:207-208)

Although this kind of investigation is a step removed from biography, it is the imagery and history from which Plath's treatment arose, and which, I will later suggest, is part of her creative process. The biographers neglect an investigation which could be employed to recreate Plath's era's perception of women and psychiatric patients which, in turn, created her. The biographers, however, tend to favour a more localized explanation of Plath's character, indulging in psychological interpretations of her familial relationships. Connections are only drawn between Plath's life and her work, constantly facing inwards, so that the poetry explains the life and the life explains the poetry. While this is obviously an important view of Plath's life, it results in biographies which present Plath as living and writing in a vacuum. In other words, neither woman nor writer is adequately contextualized.

A discussion of biography has raised issues concerning the interpretation of self, the limits imposed on biography reflecting many conventional critical discussions of Plath. In all areas there is a lack of contextualization, of both reading Plath's work inclusively, by reflecting on the degree of coherence between her teenage romances and the intensity

of *Ariel*, and reading the work as cultural texts. This is a process which enables Plath's writing to emerge from the biographical mire, not as solipsistic and internal, but as engaged in a cultural debate and consideration about the position of the self within contemporary society.

'My Emulous Urge': American Women's Magazines

I 'Star of the Campus': Initial Success

Women's magazines are complexly involved in the imaging of women in the 1950s. As Alison Adburgham shows, since their invention women's magazines have had the ability to record the popular perception of women. Adburgham charts the decline in the influence and diversity of a press aimed at women from the Restoration to the accession of Victoria. In describing the *Ladies' Magazine*, which was in print from 1770-1832, she describes the shaping of a format which persists through to the twentieth century's *The Ladies' Home Journal*:

Its formula was the formula that magazine editors were to follow for nearly two centuries: a little instruction, a little fashion, beauty, health, cookery; some free offers such as the embroidery patterns and music sheets of songs; a good serial story, some shorter romantic tales, some charming romantic pictures; a little sentimental verse. And, of course, the answer to readers' letters, the heart-throb column. (1972:150-51)

This guide to commercial success seems to be an effortless, even banal formula yet it is one which maintained a large and faithful readership. The centrality of women's magazines to female culture is consistent, and while women are now expert

at dissecting the tricks of the publishing industry and discerning the messages of manufactured femininity, the magazines continue to be bought and, ultimately, enjoyed.

Women's Worlds, a collaborative study by Ros Ballaster, Margaret Beetham, Elizabeth Frazer and Sandra Hebron, attempts to discover the attraction of a commercial press aimed at women. By interviewing readers, they identified the factor which always sounds like an excuse: escape. It is perhaps this factor, the relationship between women's magazines and fantasy, which has limited the consideration of a connection to literature, and the influence on women writers: the relaxing, escapist activity of reading women's magazines seems to denigrate a literary tradition. Yet women writers often reveal the significance of the discourses of the magazines within their narratives.

Creating an ideal and generating a dependence, the magazines represent a complete generation of women as objects. Marjorie Ferguson describes the central role of women's magazines in positioning the female:

Alongside other social institutions such as the family, the school, the church and other media, they contribute to the wider cultural process which defines the position of women in a given society at a given point in time. (1983:1)

In contemporary writing, authors often employ women's magazines to provide a context. The 1950s is a specific period in the representation of women; a time even presented as curiously grotesque in recent fictions. Margaret Atwood's

novel *Cat's Eye* recalls this time when women were governed by society's expectations:

Or we sit on the floor in Grace's room with piles of old Eaton's Catalogues. [...] we treat these catalogues with reverence. We cut the small coloured figures out of them and paste them into scrapbooks. Then we cut out other things - cookware, furniture - and paste them around the figures. The figures themselves are always women. We call them 'My lady.' 'My lady's going to have this refrigerator,' we say. 'My lady's getting this rug.' 'This is my lady's umbrella.' (1991:53)

Through the childish game of scrapbooking a fantasy life, the expectations for women's lives are revealed. A restrictive commercial future is the aspiration for young girls in the 1950s. The femininity trap of the women's magazines contains the contradiction of being 'both the ground for identity, and the cause of identity anxiety.' (Ballaster 1991:125). Atwood explores this contradiction through the conflicts experienced by Elaine. In contemporary reflections on women's magazines, it is possible to recognize and even ironize the magazines' objectives when they construct a fantasy persona for women, instantly recognizable yet irresistible.

What was in them was promise. They dealt in transformations, they suggested an endless series of possibilities, extending like the reflections in two mirrors set facing one another, stretching on, replica after replica,

to the vanishing point. They suggested one adventure after another, one wardrobe after another, one improvement after another, one man after another. They suggested rejuvenation, pain overcome and transcended, endless love. The real promise in them was immortality. (Atwood 1990:165)

Offred's memory of *Vogue* in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is imbued with a knowingness, a recognition of the fantasy combined with a longing for this time of relative innocence. Yet women's magazines do appear on a scale of control and influence which defines the position of the ideal, acceptable woman, whether through societal pressure or enforcement.

Contemporary writers are able to employ the signifier of femininity, the woman's magazine, in ways which can be reflective, detached, even critical. Criticizing the fantasy retrospectively, they are distanced from a culture which they were once involved in. On the other hand, an attempt to evaluate the importance of women's magazines to writers who were creative within this culture, reveals a more ambiguous relationship between commercial and literary writing than is admitted by the assured excoriations expressed by contemporary feminism.

Sylvia Plath sustained an interest and a dialogue with women's magazines. She was both a loyal reader and attempted to be a regular contributor. I aim to demonstrate the extent to which this affected Plath's writing and how relevant the idiom is to her writing. Firstly, it is interesting to consider the approach taken by Plath's contemporaries.

Penelope Mortimer's novel *The Pumpkin Eater*, published a year before Plath's *The Bell Jar*, contains this advice from the knowledgeable Irene Douthwaite introducing the importance of the magazine:

Well, there's a great long bit about Princess Elizabeth in this one, and a cut-out picture of Clark Gable, and it says what to do about your spots. Oh, oodles of things. You really ought to read them, you know. They'd do you much more good than that old *Jane Eyre*. (1987:56)

Irene's comparison between magazines and *Jane Eyre* is revealing, especially since *Jane Eyre* can be read as the mother of magazine fiction. The commercial importance of the female Victorian reader generated the modern plethora of women's magazines. The idea that the magazines 'do you good', that they are a type of self help manual, reveals an ideology of self improvement; an improvement which is aimed towards increasing the object's desirability while restricting her availability by containing the female through strict rules of conduct. Irene's adolescent admiration for the magazines is contrasted with the narrator's later ironic recollection:

I began reading the women's magazines, starting with the ones that Irene had left behind, and learned many useful facts such as that all men are children, all men are emotionally immature, all men dislike hairnets and criticism, all men are unfaithful, must be trusted, need hot breakfasts,

want more than they should have and need more than they are given. (1987:64)

This passage demonstrates what Mortimer interprets as the purpose of these magazines: they aim to explain men to women. She also realizes the contradictions of their editorial; men are not to be trusted, yet must be trusted, hairnets and criticism are equally male sins and women's faults. The condensed, repetitious description of the features represents the concentration placed on pleasing and understanding the other sex and reveals their spurious, and thus ineffectual, sense of female superiority. This rule book of female manners demonstrates how from an early age women are taught by society, through the seemingly innocuous cover of a magazine, to understand and sympathize with men but never attempt to change the situation.

Plath's relationship and interplay with women's magazines is never as straightforward or as definite as Mortimer's dissection. Plath's writing contains a greater tension, perhaps because of a greater tension in her life. In the various ways in which Plath interacts with the genre, she does not dismiss or ridicule but borrows and adapts, parodies and scorns, while always sustaining a dialogue with the discourses and rhetorics of the magazines. I aim to show that Plath, rather than openly discussing and criticizing women's magazines in the style of Mortimer, absorbs their contradictions and uses them as part of the construction of an identity. *The Bell Jar* explores and allows a constant ambiguity of response to the magazine world. The ethos of this world may contribute to Esther Greenwood's failure but it also shapes her recovery through her absorption of the self-help ethos. Plath, like

Esther, is connected to the themes and rhetoric of women's magazines. She read both *Jane Eyre* and *Seventeen*, Dostoyevsky and *Mademoiselle*, *Women in Love* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. While there is much research concerned with identifying the influence of other writers on Plath's work, the connection between her extensive and consistent interest in women's magazines and her own writing has been largely underestimated. By looking at the three magazines which Plath read most, *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, which also, according to the magazine universe, plot the stages of a woman's life, I hope to demonstrate how Plath's reading habit contributed to her creativity; how an early involvement with women's magazines evolved into a more surreal engagement.

To recognize the way in which the woman's magazines contribute to the constructions of consciousness in Plath's writing, it is useful to understand the sociological implications of the magazines; to consider the knowledge that *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle* and *Ladies' Home Journal* provide their readers with. They represent what the industry portrays as three distinct periods in a woman's life; unattached teenager, fiancée or young wife, wife and mother, presenting, however diffusely, the prevailing image for women of that age. They encapsulate the imagined perfection of women, an image which was being reflected in other media outlets, such as television and cinema; but the women's magazine compresses all these details into one package, however diffuse, which is consistent and reliable in its prescription. By examining these magazines from 1949 through to the beginning of 1963, a period in which Plath was familiar with them, it is possible to measure their individual editorial messages.

It is significant that during this time, the content of the magazines changed very little. If the research is carried further, even until the end of 1963, there are changes in the editorial content, but during this period the magazines stay significantly similar. *Seventeen* is aimed at the teenage, pre-college market. Visually, it is large and bright but not particularly glossy. *Seventeen* is concerned with cultivating a girl's appearance, which will enable her to capture a man. The pre-engagement image of the magazine is reflected in the advertisements, where silverware features heavily. *Seventeen* offers itself as a grooming, instruction manual concerned with creating women from girls. Centred around self-improvement, the image of its readership is presented as in need of a little improvement, insidiously implying that there is always room for improvement. The tone of features is inclusive, almost like a private club in which girls can admit their inadequacies and receive friendly remedies. The focus is on personal relationships; there is very little information on careers, although there started to be an occasional article and career advertisements in the early sixties when *Seventeen* began to follow *Mademoiselle's* approach. *Seventeen* carries an emphasis on peer acceptance and popularity, but, of course, only within the favoured peer group. It aims to create the average girl, one who is not too clever, not too glamorous; the ideal mate.

If the magazines are accepted as forming a larger pattern, *Mademoiselle* is a graduation from *Seventeen*. The tone is increasingly self-confident, aimed at engaged or newly-married women, a readership of college and career girls. This readership is perhaps a little hopefully defined in an advertisement for subscriptions:

All college girls acclaim it,
 Career girls think it's swell,
 Young housewives read its every page,
 The name is MADEMOISELLE.
 (*Mlle* 1949a:306)

This description reveals the eagerness of the magazines to provide labels for their readers, appearing to reveal more about the individuals than they actually do. *Mademoiselle's* content is generally more sophisticated than *Seventeen*. Labelling itself as 'The magazine for smart young women', it gives fashion and beauty a high profile but it is not a beauty manual in the style of *Seventeen*. *Mademoiselle* does not assume that it needs to transform its readers; the editorials indicate that they expect a high standard and commitment from the readership. The magazine expects to be dealing with confident self-assured women and consequently its tone is more detached. There is little room for uncertainty. It does not offer guidance to the unsure, but reconfirms the ideas and appearance of the confident. As a high powered magazine, *Mademoiselle* could be criticized for exerting undue pressure on its readership which could lead to feelings of insecurity. On the more positive side, the magazine does provide coverage of career planning and implies a certain degree of independence: financial, and to a certain extent, emotional. The resulting picture of the independent woman, however, is not supported by any complex awareness of the social position of its readership as women; or by even a rudimentary theory of society. The magazine does not recognize or

acknowledge any limitations on, or difficulties in, attaining the situations it assumes. It confidently suggests anything is possible, that women can have careers and choices, but this confidence proceeds without an understanding of society, without acknowledging the actual circumstances for women. Janice Winship in *Inside Women's Magazines* understands this limitation as a flaw in the ideology of British women's magazines. She describes the problem specifically in relation to the agony aunts:

Agony aunties (and magazines) act as 'friends' to women - they bring women together in their pages - and yet by not providing the knowledge to allow women to see the history of their common social condition, sadly and ironically, they come between women, expecting, and encouraging, them to do alone what they can only do together. (1987:80)

Mademoiselle packages optimism and determination, but approaches each situation as individually soluble with no recognition that as the problems extend beyond one woman so must their remedies. This optimism is also reflected in the adverts in the separate careers section which concentrate heavily on fashion openings and up-market secretarial jobs. The conception of the career girl as superior helpmeet to a famous male remains paramount, both in *Mademoiselle's* editorial and career section. An advertisement for the School of Speedwriting quotes a student's recommendation: 'Thanks to SPEEDWRITING shorthand, I have a job most girls dream of - secretary to the casting director of a large Hollywood movie studio.' (SV

1956a:122). Individual success might, of course, involve journalism for the very magazines that define this as success.

Ladies' Home Journal is 'The Magazine Women Believe In'; charting the final progression to stability as befits an older, established woman's magazine, although the appearance became increasingly youthful through the 1960s. The magazine is aimed at a married readership with children: at the wife and mother. There is no mention of careers; instead, it suggests voluntary work. The magazine carries a moral temperature and consciousness, with political features fairly prominent during the 1950s. Not that these features are concerned with revolutionizing the situation of women and the family: they are non-subversive and concerned with the moral climate of America and the political fear generated by the Cold War. *Ladies' Home Journal* had a huge concern with the welfare and necessity of family. Any political comment is from a totally self-effacing position, concerned with the moral climate of the nation which ultimately the readers took it upon themselves to maintain. But the magazine was not old fashioned. It positioned itself at the forefront of a changing society and discussed issues which carried a degree of subversion: single mothers, sex and teenagers; but this liberal concern is still generated from a belief in the centrality of the family. The magazine featured the advice of 'experts', positioning the readers as concerned, sympathetic learners, to benefit from the advice and opinions of these experts. As the magazine progressed, the authority of experts became increasingly involved in beauty and the manufacturing of the image. Features and adverts in the beauty and fashion field increased; the role of mother seemed no longer glamorous enough and the race for youth began.

Although these magazines are different, they share certain features, and offer a progression from the *Seventeen* girl who is shaped into a woman, through the independently aspirational *Mademoiselle* woman, to the *Ladies' Home Journal* wife and mother who satisfies her desires by moral concern. Magazine fiction, both short stories and serials, particularly reinforce these ideals.

Plath persistently submitted her writing to these magazines, yet critics consistently overlook this material. Plath first published in *Seventeen* in 1950 when 'And Summer Will Not Come Again' appeared. Both 'Initiation' and 'Den of Lions' were published in *Seventeen* after winning fiction competitions. *Mademoiselle*, as well as awarding the fiction prize to 'Sunday at the Mintons', published the poem 'Mad Girl's Love Song' in August 1953. *Ladies' Home Journal* did publish Plath's poem 'Second Winter' in 1958, but her prose, which is where her ambition truly lay, was never accepted. In 1959 Plath expressed this ambition in her journal: 'When I write my first *Ladies' Home Journal* story I will have made a step forward.' (Plath 1987:297). In *Bitter Fame*, Anne Stevenson evaluates this ambition to publish in the glossy women's magazine monthlies:

Clearly Sylvia was addicted already to the sugary adjectives of advertising, where calendar pad prose was a prerequisite for success. She was prepared to suffer any number of rejections, slave any number of hours over a story or a poem, if only she could place it in one of the national 'slicks', magazines that she regarded as arbiters of fashion. (1990:20)

Stevenson's judgement that Plath was addicted to the magazines' rhetoric and regarded them as the purveyors of fashion and style is partly true, but it does not allow for a more incisive interpretation than slavish devotion. It could also be claimed that Plath's continuing desire to publish in high profile, well-paying magazines was a wish to be financially independent and to be recognized as a professional commercial writer; yet it is unclear that any ambition is *purely* commercial as this desire contains various social factors within it; but in any case, I am centrally concerned with how this ambition affected her writing and with how she used the experience of such writing in her work.

Yet Plath was not very successful in publishing in the women's magazines. Although she read the fiction they did publish, she was not successful in providing the magazines with the material they required. She did not publish in *Mademoiselle* and *Seventeen* after her initial success and never published in *Ladies' Home Journal*, although she did publish the short story 'The Lucky Stone' in the British women's magazine *My Weekly* in 1961. This success, however, did not satisfy her craving for American success. She continued to try for an American publication, and it may be assumed, occasionally wrote for this purpose. By looking at the Plath short stories which are published, collected together in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, the extent to which she complied with and copied the fiction to be found in women's magazines, how she employed their techniques, can be investigated.

Publications

Plath's relationship with these magazines is, as I have indicated, a complex one which is not merely confined to her successful publications, but it is with these publications that I am initially concerned. Plath's desire to publish in the magazines developed chiefly in the area of the short story, although poetry was occasionally published. It is useful to begin by establishing the working and publishing relationship between Plath and women's magazines. Plath is not the only respected writer to have had an involvement with women's magazines, both Sandra Gilbert and Joan Didion were *Mademoiselle* guest editors, but a unique relationship exists between Plath's understanding of the format and her writing. It was not unusual for established or aspiring writers to appear in the women's magazines. As part of the established circuit, Marianne Moore's and W H Auden's poetry appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Mademoiselle*'s fiction was always of a high literary standard: Truman Capote, Paul Bowles and Carson McCullers were all regularly included. These magazines courted an informed readership, and these writers appeared as the quota of intelligent output, providing *Ladies' Home Journal*'s culture contribution and maintaining *Mademoiselle*'s campus profile. In August 1956, *Ladies' Home Journal* published a poem, 'Lullaby', the poet being Adrienne Cecile Rich. As well as having a yearly Merit Award, which variously included Françoise Sagan and Edna O'Brien, *Mademoiselle* prided itself on these literary connections and the publication of new talent. When the magazines' choice of writers is considered, Plath's involvement does not perhaps seem so

surprising. This relatively high content of quality writing may seem an adequate explanation for Plath's desired involvement, suggesting that it was solely a desire for literary exposure, and she was no more involved than any of these other writers.

Then: the magazine story: written seriously, but easily, because it is easier to manipulate strictly limited characters, almost caricatures, some of them, than the diary "I" of the novel, who must also become, in her way limited, but only so that she can grow to the vision I have now of life, which tomorrow will be a fuller vision, and tomorrow. (Plath 1987:164)

Plath's journal entry from 1957 draws a comparison between the work of the magazine story and the novel. She recognizes the formulaic nature of magazine fiction, the predestined characters and plots, describing the work as if it only requires steady effort to successfully produce. This is in contrast to novel writing which she describes as demanding a more complex notion of coherence. She has no formula for the novel, yet claims magazine fiction uses the same characters, the same repetitions. Her description of writing these short stories suggests that she is aware of her capability in producing them.

Seventeen published Plath's early story 'And Summer Will Not Come Again' as part of their 'It's All Yours' section in August 1950. Anne Stevenson describes it thus:

When *Seventeen* published her sentimental story 'And Summer Will Not Come Again', about a girl who falls in love

with her tennis instructor, Sylvia was ecstatic. Study your market, the editor had advised. Sylvia had studied it, drawing on her gift for pastiche to produce a problem story with a touch of pathos exactly calculated to impress the comfortable conscience of *Seventeen's* middle-class readership. (1990:20)

Stevenson suggests that the story is typical of *Seventeen* fiction, while also implying that it was a study for Plath, an exercise in imitation, rather than an effort of creativity. Yet Plath's expert formulas did not always result in publication. 'A Day in June', written by Plath in 1949, adheres in many ways to the rules of magazine fiction, yet was never accepted. The story captures adolescent sexual apprehension through the girls' fascination with tricking the boys into paying for their boat hire, followed by their subsequent regret. Plath experiments with the style of magazine fiction:

There is one day you can never forget, no matter how hard you try. You always remember when summer comes again, and it's warm enough to go canoeing. When the first blue June day comes, there is the memory, vivid, crystal, as if seen through tears.... (1986:247)

The direct address to the reader, the repeated 'you', reflects the most common tone of women's magazines. Winship details the desired effect of this approach:

It may address you directly: 'Self-esteem': a little will take you a long way' declares *Company*; [...] Like the language of advertising, these sell lines for that issue's inside delights ambiguously address 'you' as an individual. There is the suggestion that the relationship being struck up is the intimate one between the magazine and 'you' - just one reader. (1987:12)

Seventeen frequently adopts this tone, inviting the reader into their world of beauty knowledge: 'The Seventeen Look: You can have it in a week' (SV 1955a:56). It is also used by the regular feature 'From a Boy's Point of View' by Jimmy Wescott. Every month he provides a patronizing description of how boys view girls: 'The trouble is with you and the other girls [...] And in case you don't know, boys cannot take Anxiety.' (SV 1955b:40). This is designed to establish a personal relationship between magazine and reader; the illusion of being directly and exclusively addressed. Plath's use of this device places her story within the rhetoric of the magazines and this position is strengthened by her nostalgic, sentimental opening.

Plath's first paragraph imitates a story's blurb, the short extract that is published alongside the title to hook readers and provide an idea of the plot. 'A Change Within' by Laurie Hillyer, published in *Ladies' Home Journal* in January 1949, is headed by a typical lead-in blurb:

Because she was a child, Frinny did not quite understand;
but because she was a woman, she would remember.
(LHJ 1949:40)

Plath achieves this precise note of nostalgia, the use of the past and the not-quite-melodramatic. 'A Day in June' is structured by compact, leading paragraphs, like extended blurbs, while the constant use of dots as a typographical device attempts to create an atmosphere of suspended time and recreated memory: 'Here is a boy ... paddling you in a canoe ... he likes you.' (1986:249). The situation of boy meets girl, the story of adolescence and first love is firmly expressed within the realm of women's or girls' magazines. A certain social position indicated in the mention of school: 'None of the boys at school have ever been this nice to you.' (1986:249), suggests their status as nice girls, a requirement for a respectable teenage magazine's heroine. The 'you' of the story, who is never identified, is typical of the heroine that Plath creates within this genre. The melancholy ending, where the heroines recognize that their feelings may be going against the High School code, potentially presents a fissure between the magazines' ethos which demands conformity with the acceptable group, and the heroines' actions. Plath's heroines however, contain one of the contradictions of the women's magazines, and demonstrate the ethos that allows the female reader to progress effortlessly from *Seventeen* to *Ladies' Home Journal*. They both demonstrate such a degree of moral individuality, that they are embraced by the ideology of women's magazines. The 'you' of 'A Day in June' finishes in a sentimental, self-reflexive display of regret but one which is still oddly attractive and retains the reader on her side:

How can you ever explain how it was? How can you ever explain that you betrayed with more than just money? There's something so desolate, so final about an empty road. You walk on, not talking. (1986:250)

This faint tone of melodrama, with the repeated self questioning and phrases such as 'empty road', is written within the context of a strain of women's fiction where the woman is emotionally fragile, self-indulgently invoking a memory attached to adolescence. The moral questioning seems a more or less transparent pretext for an emotional excursion. 'The Stolen March' by Constance Pultz, published in *Seventeen*, is written in a similar, reflexive tone:

'That night,' said her mother, 'I cried myself to sleep.'
 'Why?' Gina asked.
 'Because I wanted to be Lily.'
 'And feel the things she was feeling?' asked Gina.
 'Yes', said her mother, 'and know the things she was knowing, and be all the things she was beginning to be.'
 (SV 1956b:132)

This evasive dialogue contains melancholy regret and an invocation of the innocence of youth, a state which becomes tarnished for the heroine of Plath's story. There is in Plath's story, however, a hint of submerged criticism. Although the reader is firmly reconciled with the heroine at the end, the description of her emotions may suggest an indirect attack on the behaviour encouraged by the magazines, while seeming ostensibly to comply

with their ethos of individual courage. The direct address combines the position of the narrator and the reader: while the writer may also be implicated, the 'you' ensuring that even the writer has no escape route, the 'you' is also directed towards readers, inscribing them into the text. Closer examination of the detail of the stories supports this stance of implicated detachment. A narrative concentration is placed on the apparently gentle and acceptable deceitfulness of the girls as they employ the tricks that make them women:

You pick the rhododendrons more carefully now, with a conscious attempt at grace and nonchalance. [...] You both turn abruptly with feigned surprise. [...] Flattered, she pretends to hesitate and says, 'Should I?' [...] You laugh always, being mysterious, and, you think, coquettish. (1986:248-49)

Below the surface of the discourse is a half-guilty critique of an encompassing ethos of dishonesty. The critique is surprisingly vicious; while it appears to be a criticism merely of the narrator, through her own recollection of her own behaviour, it is attacking the reader, the reader who has been seduced into identifying with the story through the apparently safe, recognizable signifiers of character and scene. These moments suggest the narrator's loathing, a confusion of identification and revulsion. In this early story, it is already possible to discern the confusion of a self-disgust which is turned inwards and an outward directed anger that came to characterize much of Plath's later work. 'A Day in June' reveals the element of subversion to be found in Plath's

magazine fiction, the awareness of the genre, which contributes to the consciousness of her later writing.

In January 1953 *Seventeen* published 'Initiation', a short story about the ethics of high school sororities which revolves around the initiation of Millicent and her subsequent moral dilemma. Millicent is portrayed as defying the High School pressures, but in a way which will not finally isolate her from the group, and, of course, from the readership:

How she had proved something to herself by going through everything, even Rat Court, and then deciding not to join the sorority after all. And how she could still be friends with everybody. Sisters with everybody. Tracy, too.

(SV 1953a:94)

Millicent's decision does not mean that she wishes to be an outsider or excluded from the circle of the sorority, 'the magic circle'. Her desire to stay 'friends with everybody' attempts to ensure a conclusion within the sphere of popularity. *Seventeen's* ethos of acceptance and belonging, measurements of popularity, allows Millicent to remain part of her community. The rejection of the sorority as an act of loyalty towards a friend, and as an affirmation of self, conforms with the ethics of girl's teenage magazines, as long as that self remains a 'sister'. Millicent's final decision to rebel is fuelled by feelings which relate to the magazine. She reflects on the initiation week and the label 'gopher': 'It was degrading, like being given a number. It was a denial of individuality.' (SV 1953a:93). Millicent learns the moral and shares it with *Seventeen's* readers: 'And really, you didn't

have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings.' (SV 1953a:94). Although a highly guarded attack on sororities, 'Initiation' does suggest a distinction between the club or clique which tends to exclude and the group which tends to include. Millicent's dilemma, which is necessarily involved in this distinction, is resolved through the rejection of the sorority to remain part of a wider group. Although it is Millicent's 'own private initiation' that is favoured over the public one, an assertion of individuality is accepted as it remains within a group mentality. 'Initiation' maintains a contradiction which the magazines were able to contain. It combines the importance of an adherence to the group with a honesty to the self, suggesting that they are compatible. *Seventeen* replies to a reader's problem, 'T V Twosome', with advice which strengthens a prevailing group mentality: 'However, we believe that your particular group stands to gain rather than lose popularity by sticking to the old standards.' (SV 1955b:177). This refers to the reputation of the group within the larger group of society and it reflects the moral guidance the magazines claim to offer. The reader's letter does not identify herself as belonging to a group, merely saying 'several of us', but the rhetoric of the magazine enforces group identification. At the same time, the magazine situates itself as shaping individuals. There are numerous articles concerned with finding yourself, both through personality and looks. But the self that is found is one that must be integrated into society.

That 'Initiation' was published in *Seventeen* confirms its success within the genre. The subject matter is tailor-made to the environment and features the East Coast girl reflected in the magazines' publishing area of New York. Plath writes in the idiom

of magazine fiction: 'She could not exactly say what had decided her revolt, but it definitely had something to do with Tracy and something to do with the heather birds.' (SV 1953a:65). The use of the indefinite 'something' reflects a teenager's vocabulary, and there is an ease with which the text can be adapted to a blurb designed to intrigue the magazine's reader. That the 'something' never becomes more precisely identified within the larger text is something that is conveniently elided. This type of American colloquial dialogue is prevalent in the magazine's fiction. Two third prize competition winners in January 1956 wrote stories situated outside the 1950s. 'Against the Wind' by Stephanie Lang is set in England at the time of Henry VIII: "'Now don't be sad,'" Will begged. "We've had our May Day, haven't we?" (SV 1956a:60). Gail Lambert's prize winning story 'Decision' is set in a space age future: "'What are you? Why are you here?" Moira sensed but dimly the agony it cost Bob to say those words.' (SV 1956a:96). In these examples, it is striking that although they are placed centuries and planets apart, the language remains firmly within a 1950s American teenage rhetoric. 'Initiation' illustrates how adept Plath was at writing within this idiom and also how subtly the text could undermine the discourses on which she was drawing.

The only other short story that Plath published in the American women's magazines was 'Sunday at the Mintons', which won *Mademoiselle's* fiction contest in 1952. This story of an older couple, a brother and sister, breaks from the magazines' demand for romantic involvement; but Plath's use of character does support *Mademoiselle's* literary aspirations and reflects on their publication of work by Carson McCullers. Plath's very clear

opposition of the feminine and masculine, relying on comparisons between logic and emotion, supports the magazine's view of an older generation. The comparison between Henry and Elizabeth is drawn through his interest in maps and calculations and her consistent daydreaming: the story labours their differences and the divide is clearly created on gender. When they were children, Elizabeth remembers: 'She had been a sallow, sickly child, and Henry had always come into see her with his round, ruddy face aglow, beaming with vigour.' (*Mlle* 1952c:373). Tension between desire and jealousy characterizes this story. Elizabeth seems content with her sedate, slightly disorganized nature in relation to Henry's, yet the exploration of the tension in their relationship reflects Elizabeth's weakness and her desire for weakness. In comparison to Henry 'she could at times fancy herself as a little girl, obedient and yielding, as she had been long ago.' (*Mlle* 1952c:255). The return to this type of relationship, where Elizabeth adopts the role of wife, allows her to return to a submissive position which she both desires and resents, a feeling contained in the ambiguous ending. There is an imagined reconciliation of masculine and feminine as Elizabeth's 'high-pitched, triumphant, feminine giggle mingled with the deep, gurgling chuckle of Henry, borne along beneath her on the outgoing tide.' (*Mlle* 1952c:378).

The age of the couple removes them from the lives of *Mademoiselle's* readers. In contrast to *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle* does not have to reinforce a strong reader identification through the fiction. Yet Plath does bring in elements which happen to be constructed by the magazines and especially the poorly founded optimism of *Mademoiselle* previously described. Although Plath

does not label her, Elizabeth is a spinster; she displays all the stereotypical signs of not being involved in married culture. Henry is patronizing towards Elizabeth, his distaste at how she runs a household expressed by his presumptions about her previous life: "I wonder how you managed to fend for yourself all those years you've worked alone at the library in town, what with your day dreaming and such." (*Mlle* 1952c:372). For a magazine that espouses the attainability of a career and family, Elizabeth's spinsterish, isolated life is an antidote, a discussion of masculine and feminine tensions which are not given space within *Mademoiselle's* editorial.

'Sunday at the Mintons' dissolves the boundaries between reality and fantasy as Henry tries to retrieve Elizabeth's brooch, and 'in an ecstasy of horror' she watches him be swallowed by the sea. She goes to join him with a feeling of maternalism: 'She thought sympathetically of Henry and how he never could digest shellfish.' (*Mlle* 1952c:378). This reconciliation, engineered by Elizabeth, is perhaps accepted since through the sea they are entering an area of fantasy, an area controlled by Elizabeth. A parallel exists between this lapse in the narrative, an area orchestrated by Elizabeth, and the environment of the magazine. *Mademoiselle*, and the women's world that it is an initiation into, is a lapse from the actual world into one governed by fantasy and desires. The escape value of magazines, the relaxation they provide, is similar to Elizabeth's partial removal from her mundane life into one where she herself creates the plot. Women's magazines, since they are made up from a variety of articles, also allow for a free forming narrative, for the reader to construct the order, to be in control of the text. Elizabeth partly

rearranges her text: she takes over from the narrator to control the telling of her fantasy and escape. The return of control to the narrator, who provides 'a sudden tug at Elizabeth's arm' and a dry Henry, signals her return to a recognizable, familiarly mundane life with a 'sigh of submission.' Plath's work can be seen to be operating at the heart of female fantasy, placing her writing within this system. For the act of reading it is the end of the story, and as the reader is brought out of Elizabeth's fantasy, she is brought out of Plath's fantasy, and with the closing of the magazine, out of the women's fantasy, the fantasy of a complete *Mademoiselle* life.

The purpose of women's magazine fiction to provide escape for the reader is expressed in a reader's letter published in *Ladies' Home Journal*:

I just want you to know how much I enjoyed the story 'The Twisted Ring', by Anne Wormser. By the time I reached the end, I was dropping big sentimental tears all over the page. It might be classified as an 'escape-type' story, but I was so sorry to see it end. I wanted to turn back to the beginning and escape all over again. (LHJ 1952d:38)

The escape in these fictions is towards a perfected femininity involved with ideas of romance and beauty. It is significant that the escape that Plath provides in 'Sunday at the Mintons' is through a rejection of the demands and constrictions of a woman's life.

The Plath short stories that the women's magazines published provide a starting point for considering her continued

involvement with the magazines. 'Initiation' and 'Sunday at the Mintons' illustrate how Plath complied with the general borders of the magazines, providing material which corresponded to the image and ideals they projected. Although these stories are at points reinventions of what the reader expects and become slightly disengaged with the magazines' ethos, they are hardly subversive. 'Initiation' and 'Sunday at the Mintons' are acceptable within the rhetoric of woman's magazine fiction. Plath's relationship with women's magazines, however, moves beyond these early publication successes.

In a more abstract approach, it is not only Plath's writing which is situated within the fantasy, but Plath herself. It is significant to consider the dynamics of this position. The January 1958 issue of *Mademoiselle* published two poems by Denise Levertov: 'A Supermarket in Mexico' and 'The Whirlwind'. This full page feature is headed by the caption: 'We take pleasure in being the first national magazine to publish these poems by a young woman who has been called "the best poet of ... the new avant-garde."' (*Mlle* 1958:23). By comparing Levertov's publication with Plath's, however, Plath's special relationship becomes clear.

Mademoiselle's feature suggests that the publication of Levertov's poems was pursued by the magazine. In contrast, Plath's publications in *Mademoiselle* were achieved through submission of her writing to the magazine and by entering competitions. Her short story 'Sunday at the Mintons' won their 1952 fiction competition with the heading 'Prize Story by Sylvia Plath, Smith College, '54'. The following paragraph appeared at the end of the story:

Sylvia Plath was scrubbing furniture at a Cape Cod hotel when our award wire arrived. A sophomore Eng. major at Smith, she's working her way through with a scholarship, newspaper work, summer jobs that have netted her an amazing variety of characters 'who manage to turn up, dismembered or otherwise, in stories.' (*Mlle* 1952c:378)

The accompanying picture is of a widely smiling Plath, her hair cut in a shiny page boy. She looks friendly, acceptable, available. This is in contrast to the photograph that accompanies Levertov's poems. The difference in the presentation of these two writers demonstrates the uniqueness of Plath's relationship to women's magazines. Levertov looks like a poet: her straight, dark hair is pulled back into a fairly severe ponytail and she is wearing a plain white shirt. Her expression is serious, concentrated upon a small, elfin face. Levertov seems distanced, detached from her surroundings. She appears as a person outside the image of the magazine, a poet making a guest appearance. Plath seems involved, her image is interchangeable with the image of the magazine. She seems as if she could appear anywhere in the magazine, in the beauty pages or in a teenage feature. The text which describes Plath is within the tone and rhetoric of *Mademoiselle's* editorial and Plath is presented as one of the readers. The description of her 'scrubbing furniture' is designed to encourage identification, to accept her as one of them. She is an aspiring student writer, like many *Mademoiselle's* readers, and the paragraph aims to convey her enthusiasm and excitement. Even in comparison to the issue's other fiction prize winner,

Elizabeth Marshall, Plath is presented as part of the magazine, as some one who desires their approval and praise. Plath appears intimate with the magazine, part of its ideology, while the other writers seem to be just visiting.

Plath did return to the pages of *Mademoiselle* in January 1959, included in a 'Four Young Poets' feature. Although this can be interpreted as mature success and recognition, she did return with the ultimate women's magazine trophy, a handsome husband. Both Plath and Hughes are featured, yet the accompanying photography shows Hughes as central, with Plath almost peering over his shoulder. She remains part of the magazine ethos; her talent imagistically reflected by his.

A more intense involvement, which acutely positions the relationship between the situating of women within their own image, is Plath's guest editorship at *Mademoiselle*. In August 1953, Plath featured in *Mademoiselle*'s college issue as Guest Assistant Editor under the guidance of Cyril Abels. By considering Plath's position in *Mademoiselle* I am not attempting to biographically evaluate her experience, but exploring the mechanisms of the magazine, how they manufacture and shape reality to achieve a cohesive narrative. Plath's appearance in this magazine is a case in point; her presentation reflects onto the magazine.

The advert that Plath would have responded to featured in the August 1952 issue with the caption: 'Campaigning for a career? *Mademoiselle*'s College Board Contest is your ticket'. The magazines feminized puns, making them local and familiar, thus reducing wider issues to a more limited feminine sphere. 'Feminine' is used here in relation to the image the magazines

constructed: a heterosexual, restrictive identity. This caption is accompanied by a sketch of fashionable female undergraduates on a mock protest march, brandishing banners with 'We Want Futures' and 'Experience' written on them. The localization and reduction of images and language from another context into a dialogue of individualism, and what Winship describes as 'aspirational feminism', is a device often employed by *Mademoiselle's* editorial. This adaptation of language was widely exploited by the advertisers and it is an area which I will return to.

Plath's stint with *Mademoiselle* in June 1953 is a narrative which is interpreted by the magazine in their August issue. Plath's involvement demonstrates how the magazine projects a personality and creates a relationship with the readers. Text which is printed and attributed to Plath is 'Mad Girl's Love Song' and the article 'Poets on Campus' featuring Alastair Reid, Anthony Hecht, Richard Wilbur, F George Steiner and William Burford. This all-male collection could hardly have been inspirational for Plath's 'campaign for a career'. What is more interesting for an understanding of Plath's work is not what *Mademoiselle* actually published by her but how they absorbed her, how they presented and contained her within their pages. Her first appearance a year earlier identified her as a reader, and while she is still in that position, this much closer involvement with the magazine allows her a type of make-over, a more glamorous presence.

Plath introduces the magazine's college section:

We're stargazers this season, bewitched by an atmosphere of evening blue. Foremost in the fashion constellation we spot

MLLE's own tartan, the astronomic versatility of sweaters, and men, men, men - we've even 'taken the shirts of their backs! Focusing our telescope on college news around the globe, we debate and deliberate. Issues illuminated: academic freedom, the sorority controversy, our much labeled (and libeled) generation. From our favorite fields, stars of the first magnitude shed a bright influence on our plans for jobs and futures. Although horoscopes for our ultimate orbits aren't yet in, we Guest Eds. are counting on a favorable forecast with this send-off from MLLE, the star of the campus. (*Mlle* 1953:213)

This extensive punning on constellation language is complemented by the photograph of the Guest Editors making a star with Plath positioned at the top point. It is a rhetoric easily identifiable: the guest editors complement the style of the magazine. It is a fantasy dialogue and the women are involved in an experience which is presented back to the reader as a *Mademoiselle* experience; with no room for individual reaction, the women become subsumed by the magazine image and identity.

Mademoiselle featured the article 'Jobographies' by Neva Nelson: San Jose State College, '55 and Janet Wagner: Knox College, '54. Beginning: 'What sort of girl wins a *Mademoiselle* Guest Editorship and comes to New York to work for a month on the August College issue?' (*Mlle* 1953:234), it is a handwriting analysis by Herry O. Teltscher. Each girl is posed, some more convincingly than others. Plath's photograph is of her, rather stiffly, holding a rose, accompanied by the analysis: 'Sylvia will

succeed in artistic fields. She has a sense of form and beauty and an intense enjoyment in her work.' (*Mlle* 1953:234). It is very much a surface presentation, a sentence or two about each girl with very little variation in the commentary. It does not seem to be difficult to assess what sort of girl wins this competition. All the girls are ideal *Mademoiselle* readers, a liberal arts background and a sense of individuality. But each girl is in a sense uniformed: there is no information about their lives outside college or their personal backgrounds. They are twenty 'hatted-and-gloved young women, alert and poised-looking', assembled to be absorbed by *Mademoiselle*. They feature in the magazine as *Mademoiselle* creations and property.

The girls are gathered together again in the 'Memo from the Guest Editor'. The photographs always show the girls ecstatically happy and involved, and maybe they were, but there is no room for other feelings. In an attempt to convey the informality of these pictures, their authenticity, Plath's snapshot is accompanied by the caption: 'On the Regis Roof, Anne, Sylvia and dates hold before-dinner confab.' (*Mlle* 1953:54). The photograph shows Sylvia and Anne with their decidedly mature dates, all laughing and apparently having a good time. But the transformation of the guest editors is inadvertently revealed by the 'Memo'. Guest Editor Madelyn Mathers states that for the winners: "The Magazine for Smart Young Women' turned from dream to the almost real' (*Mlle* 1953:52). Reflecting on Plath's involvement, her evening is described as: 'In the dream realm, we table-hopped on the St Regis Roof...' (*Mlle* 1953:52). The presentation of these young women is caught in a neverland: they are not staff yet no longer readers, simultaneously involved and excluded. They are

shown to be part of the magazine's desirable and unattainable mystique, yet are in a dream position where a concept of reality is not available. The magazine world, even when the girls are involved in it, is never real. What is most real about the magazine is its conviction to its own ethos: the 'instructor, employer and leading lady, M.L.L.E.' *Mademoiselle* is personified, containing a life and an influence which creates women in her own image.

This analysis of *Mademoiselle*'s August 1953 edition offers indicators of Plath's continued interest and use of magazines. The most obvious employment of this experience is as part of the plot of *The Bell Jar*. An understanding of the mechanisms of women's magazines contributes to an understanding of the novel: how Plath rescripted the experience, understood the necessary stripping and commodification. Esther Greenwood's involvement with the unnamed girl's magazine can be paralleled with Plath's experience. The photographs of Plath which appear in the college issue are reinterpreted as photographs of Esther. Esther is created as a poet, she has to hold a 'single, long-stemmed paper rose.' At the beginning of the novel, when Esther sums up in a voice which is effectively from a time after the events of the novel, she describes a photograph from the magazine:

And when my picture came out in the magazine the twelve of us were working on - drinking martinis in a skimpy, imitation silver-lame bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle, on some Starlight Roof, in the company of several anonymous young men with all-American bone structures hired or loaned for the

occasion - everybody would think I must be having a real whirl. (1980:2)

This is practically a description of the photograph of Plath featured in the 'Editor's Memo'. The parallels between Esther's and Plath's experience with a girl's magazine are persistent: the visit to the U.N., the movie premieres, the similarity between Cyrilly Abels and Jay Cee. The *Mademoiselle* narrative is present in *The Bell Jar*, but Esther's story is an individualized one which moves beyond the magazine's constructed narrative.

The delayed reaction of the magazine, in that the girls work in June and the text appears in August, results in the narrative of Esther's success and popularity created by the magazine, being released as she is enclosed in Belsize hospital. When Esther is in Belsize, the other women find in a fashion magazine, a photograph which they are convinced is Esther:

The magazine photograph showed a girl in a strapless evening dress of fuzzy white stuff, grinning fit to split, with a whole lot of boys bending in around her. The girl was holding a glass full of a transparent drink and seemed to have her eyes fixed over my shoulder on something that stood behind me, a little to my left. (1980:219-20)

It is these pivotal moments connecting the narratives of women's magazines and *The Bell Jar* which show Plath to be commenting on and using the style of magazines. *The Bell Jar* interacts with women's magazines on a more complex level than the exercise of merely connecting Esther's fiction with actual events in an

attempt to demonstrate how the book is based on Plath's *Mademoiselle* experience. *The Bell Jar* is admittedly partly based on Plath's experiences and knowledge of women's magazines from a biographical perspective, but there is also a relationship with women's magazines and Plath's imagination which extends to affecting her other writing in increasingly complex and exciting ways.

Esther's denial that she is in the magazine introduces questions about the construction and recognition of self. It is transparent that Esther is lying, implying that the novel has an unreliable narrator, or perhaps more accurately, more than one narrator. Plath is writing a novel about Esther who is planning on writing a novel about herself; allowing for a basic confusion of character and identity and an instability around who is authorizing the text. In relation to the photograph described above, it seems that Esther does not want to recognize herself and has detached herself from this experience. She interprets it as an image and a scene with which she is not familiar, able to describe the separate contents with detachment, yet with no understanding or recognition. But the tone of ridicule in Esther's thoughts suggest more knowledge than she is admitting. This is an insight that does not rely on the knowledge of Plath's *Mademoiselle* photograph but on identifying Esther's own mistakes in her text. Esther is continually, subtly, reinventing herself, changing her understanding of reality and who she is.

Esther's initial description of the photograph preempts the event in the novel when she denies her involvement. In the novel's initial description of the photo shoot, she punctures the fantasy by discussing the anonymous men that have been hired

like attractive shop dummies. Yet the Esther who sees the magazine and reacts to it at the time it is published, cannot recognize herself within this environment. In the first description, Esther knows she is drinking martinis and is wearing white tulle, surrounded by boys who have been 'hired or loaned'. In contrast, Esther's second reaction, which is actually her first, is one of confusion and detachment. The girl in the photograph is wearing 'fuzzy white stuff', drinking a 'transparent drink' with a 'whole lot of boys'. Esther's confusion and inarticulateness illustrate how she has forgotten the narrative of women's magazines, their symbols which create a text and a fantasy, the dream situation which is created by photography. Plath relates the centrality of women's magazines to the understanding of a woman's reception in society, and Esther is shown to be outside of the accepted recognition of women. Although *The Bell Jar* does not extensively discuss the magazines' content, it does, by situating Esther's narrative in this environment, point towards the dialogue this novel has with women's magazines. It is important to consider how a knowledge of women's magazines contributes to an understanding of Esther and, in a wider sense, to Plath's other work.

II **Becoming a Woman**

A significant relationship exists between Plath's involvement in women's magazines, through publishing and readership, and the expressions of consciousness and identity in her other writing. But although the prose written for the magazines can be accepted

as largely formulaic, there is occasionally an element of subversion and unease. Sandra Gilbert seems to offer an explanation for the apparent extremity of conflict in Plath's mature work. 'Den of Lions' won third place in a *Seventeen* fiction contest in 1951, and as a reader of *Seventeen*, Gilbert claims to remember Plath's early publishing success:

It was called 'Den of Lions,' and though the plot was fairly conventional, something about the piece affected me in inexplicable, almost mythic ways - ways in which I wouldn't have thought I could be affected by a *Seventeen*-reader's story. [...] Could the world really be like this, I wondered. Was it like this? How had selves of blood and meat been admitted onto the glossy sanitized pages of *Seventeen*? (1979:245)

Gilbert suggests that the subversive imagery found in Plath's adolescent writing contains the potency of her mature writing; suggesting a progression which connects the earlier concerns and plots with later fantasies.

The impact of the women's magazines on Plath's poetry and continuing prose writing is further suggested by the correlation between the issues and images of *The Bell Jar* and Plath's other writing. Plath began writing *The Bell Jar* in 1959, and wrote many of the *Ariel* poems on the reverse side of *The Bell Jar* manuscripts. If it is accepted that *The Bell Jar* is concerned with issues of identity and the construction of self, issues connected to the ethos and manipulations of the women's magazine, Plath's other writing clearly contains a reflection of

and commentary on this aspect of female consciousness. Plath's involvement with women's magazines, through areas of fact and fiction, becomes involved in her constructions of consciousness, into areas and inventions of fantasy. Plath's narratives and images are imbued with the visual impact of the magazines.

Although Plath's work interacts with the images and rhetoric of the women's magazine, I am not suggesting a simple artistic dependency on women's magazines. But I do claim that the images and the rhetoric of women's magazines are significant pressures on her writing. During a time of silence for American women, Plath offers a reinterpretation of these images, which is ultimately a reinterpretation and a critique of the position of women. In magazines, the depiction of women is not exclusive to this format, but invites and suggests understandings which relate to other forms and mediums within culture. The women's magazines, however, encapsulate all the elements of the composite woman: reflecting the pervasive positioning of women in the 1950s.

The extent to which women led their lives in adherence to the magazine ethos is an issue which is reflected both in Plath's life and more extensively in her work. As Plath's work interweaves with many aspects of the magazines, visually and rhetorically, they are deconstructed and critiqued. Plath's work articulately and implicitly deconstructs and reinterprets these images and fantasies within an encompassing framework of meaning. The techniques and images exploited by Plath, in relation to women's magazines, extend outward, reflecting society's attitude towards women.

In the world of women's magazines, the men in their lives are certainly the central focus, yet are also oddly peripheral to the magazines' narratives. Men appear in an oblique, suggestive fashion: while a central element in the magazines, they are largely restricted within fictive, romantic discourses; a projected fantasy which encapsulates the lover, the fiancé, the husband. The father, however, is a more focused presence, especially in *Seventeen*. If compared to the female world of mothers and daughters, the father is a virtual absence, yet both in relationships with the mother reader and the daughter reader the father is important. The husband-father is treated by *Ladies' Home Journal* in a largely maternal and tolerant tone, although never displaced from the position of head of the household. The portrayal of the relationship between father and daughter comprehends the false sense of a woman's power and influence, and reveals the emergence of the woman as an image. The father figure appears in advertisements exploiting the idea of Daddy's girl. The father does not appear as an authority figure, but as the initial man for a girl to practise her seduction techniques upon. A Christmas advertisement from 1956 shows a daughter receiving a Smith-Corona typewriter from her parents:

Remarkable She! She got exactly what she wanted. Ah but she's a charmer! (SV 1956e:51)

The father gives the present with the hope of 'better grades in school', while the mother opts for the attraction of a daughter 'grooming herself for a sweet secretarial job'. It is, however, the parents' expression of devotion, especially the father's awe at his

daughter, that suggests the presence of an expert who knows how to operate her parents. A system of exchange is in place; dutiful daughter for consumer happiness. The advertisement's rhetoric, by the use of 'charmer', signals the feminine wiles of the daughter, revealing the relationship between father and daughter as seeming to rely on strategies of enticement and seduction.

The clearest image of the father during this period is from *Seventeen*, October 1955. The feature 'Letter to an Unknown Woman', is supposed to be a father's letter to his daughter on the eve of her seventeenth birthday. The distance that the father is assumed to feel towards his daughter is couched in expressions of unfamiliarity, supposedly designed to flatter the adolescent readership. The father expresses his concerns for his daughter, bringing together elements of paternalism and restraint:

Shall I tell you the three qualities in a woman that I consider the most precious and desirable? Your mother has them [...] I can wish you nothing better than these three shining qualities of hers: gentleness, understanding and dignity. Don't ever be so emancipated that you neglect to be gentle and tender and feminine. (SV 1955a:132, 134)

This guarded warning is appropriate for the age and the ethos of the magazine. The spectre of the mother is hauled in as an example of femininity, reflecting an adoration of the maternal. The father's guidance is gently given, but it is a stern warning designed to cultivate and maintain the totems of femininity. The letter sounds like a fairy godmother's prophecy; endowing three generous gifts. It is impossible not to read images of Sleeping

Beauty, and the awakening of female sexuality as needing to be guided and controlled. The father exploits the adoration of the daughter to shape the daughter, to make her an image of her mother and the 1950s ideal woman. The slightly melancholic and reverential tone disguises the use of patriarchal authority in a syrupy coating. It should come as no surprise that the letter is signed 'Daddy'.

A few months later, in January 1956, *Seventeen* published a reader's letter which is a reply to 'Letter to an Unknown Woman'. It is written in an equally reverential tone as the father's letter, but the continual repetition creates a chanting adoration and adherence:

For seventeen years you have fed, clothed and housed me.
 For seventeen years you have taught me faith, truth and
 love for God and man. The ideals I live by are not ones you
 have set for me, but ones you have taught me to set for
 myself. The goals I really want to teach are the ones I know
 you expect me to attain. (SV 1956a:4)

The obedience of this daughter is clear. It is noticeable that the daughter relates to the authority of the father, in contrast to the similarity with the mother being appealed to. The deference that the daughter's letter reveals corresponds with notions of duty and debt, similar to what is expected by the mother. This relationship, however, often encourages sibling similarity; the mother and daughter can be interpreted as sisters, while the father remains quietly authoritative. The daughter is in a

submissive position of compliance which is used to enforce gender division.

Plath's poetry engages with these cultural concepts of women. The rhetoric of Plath's poem 'Daddy' is conventionally thought to reflect a child's sensibility and perspective combined with an adult daughter's ambivalence. The rhythm and language of the nursery connects with images of fear and masochism:

I have always been scared of *you*,
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
 (1988:223)

Within this narrative of childhood desertion and adult retribution, however, another narrative exists which arises from a knowledge of the popular perception of women in Plath's era. The infantilization of women and an adherence to the law of the father, through and even beyond adolescence, suggests another depth to the use of the address 'daddy':

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
 (1988:222)

The child-like dialogue which the poem is trapped within is also the rhetoric of the reverential daughter from *Seventeen*. The limitations of the father and child relationship did not, for daughters, end at adolescence and womanhood. The use of Daddy refers to a continued obedience to a patriarchal figurehead, in an iconic sense, which traps women in a child-like role, reflected in the *Seventeen* feature. Plath's poem encapsulates the pervasive submission of the woman to the father; the naming is not only a link between childhood and adult experience but criticizes and exposes the restriction of women to this narrative and role. Plath's poem subverts the dutiful daughter role through all her ages.

In this example, a correspondence between the unusual rhetoric of Plath's poem and the fictions of popular culture can be recognized. 'Daddy' encapsulates a critique of women's articulation and their position in relation to masculinity. This area is further explored through a discussion of the visual presence of women in the magazines, initially defined through a masculine gaze.

The Gaze

Plath's work reveals a visual imagination: the physical positioning of her personae often reflects the cultural positioning of women. In her dictionary she consistently underlined colours, showing an alertness for language but also a concern for the visual. Her work often creates a visual narrative centering round the representation and positioning of women, exploring the limits of

self presentation and reception, raising questions about the way in which women are viewed, and how they respond to the objectification involved. Plath's interest in the power of the gaze critiques the photographic presentation of women in the magazines.

Women's magazines create a dialogue with their readers through the photographic image; mainly through the fashion feature spreads. Fashion features always contain a submerged narrative which the reader is able to recognize and interpret, although this does not operate on the level of reality but of fantasy, a process which feeds into the narrative structures of Plath's work. The relationship between the reader and the image relies on the use of fantasy and an unstated understanding of visual images. There is an unspoken link between commercialism and emotional gratification. The relationship between fashion photography and the reader revolves around a recognition of the gaze, and a consideration of its implications.

Women are central in the fashion shoots for the obvious consumer reason that it is their clothes that are being sold to the reader. There are two consistent choices in the direction of the gaze. The woman is either looking out of the magazine, forcing eye contact with the reader or she is within the magazine, the direction of her gaze within an imagined narrative. An example of the woman remaining within the magazine is found in *Seventeen* October 1955. The feature is given a title 'Big Game Warm-Up' giving the fashion photographs a context and environment. This fashion spread contains many elements typical of the fashion photography

from this era. The women are positioned as spectating; they are watching the male football match. The difference between the males' uniformity, since they are wearing team strips, and the females' fashion dress, is perhaps not that striking. The girls are wearing a colour scheme, their outfits are complementing and flattering each other. This is a style typical of *Seventeen*, reflecting the images Plath was consuming and contemplating. In the main picture, one girl is laughing, her head thrown back, eyes closed, while the other is looking at a male in front of her. The reader can detect the direction of her gaze as it is operating within the enclosed space of the magazine but the object of the gaze, the football hero, is in soft focus. Within the narrative of the fashion story, men are positioned as central for the women who feature in this fantasy in which the reader participates, yet are often peripheral to the visual image. The reader interprets these figures not as staged models, but as responsive relationships within this scenario of a football match, thus creating a fiction from the image. Although the reader understands this romance narrative, it is important to recognize that the men feature as peripheral to the gaze. They are involved in the narrative but they are not central to the visual pleasure of the reader. This focus remains on the women.

In the following month's fashion spread, 'Your Dancing Heart', *Seventeen* uses the presence of men to contribute to the narrative in a slightly different way. The women are still contained within the magazine: their eyes, while they are dancing with their partners, are dreaming into the distance, seeking out, as it were, the imagined party. The male is in

focus and in three out of the four photographs his gaze is directly on his partner, the woman he is dancing with. In no photograph is the woman looking directly at the man. This scenario is created as a scene for the reader, a tableau in which they are not present or addressed. In 'Your Dancing Heart' the woman is being admired and objectified within the text by a man, while she is being similarly treated by the reader.

A more explicit example of this type of double focus and admiration is a Pepsi-Cola advertisement from *Ladies' Home Journal* in July 1956. The text of the advert reads:

Aren't today's people wonderful? Just being around them makes you feel so good! They're so wonderful to look at - these slender, handsome, active men and women of today. (LHJ 1956a:31)

The accompanying illustration is of a man and a woman in swim wear relaxing on a beach with their Pepsi-Colas. It is interesting to consider the direction of their gaze which reveals their positioning in the advertisement's narrative. The woman is reclining, her head is thrown back and her eyes are closed. The man is sitting, looking admiringly at the woman. The figures are in a typical, fashion feature position; the male's controlled gaze on to the woman highlights the product, equating her desirability with the product's desirability. The caption includes an encouraged visual admiration of both men and woman while the illustration positions this gaze firmly on to the woman. That the female model's eyes are closed increases this response for the reader. The objectified woman within the narrative corresponds

with the classic positioning of women: 'Eyes closed, she is at once receptive and mysterious, endlessly desirable because any desire can be projected on to her.' (Walters 1978:8).

Within the visual narrative of their fashion features, women's magazines illustrate, both inadvertently and by design, the objectification of women by men; their status as ornament and fantasy. Plath's work engages with the cultural implications of this positioning. Plath recreates the magazine scenario of the woman being watched by a masculine eye and perception. The ending of 'The Wishing Box' reads like a descriptive still of this image. Agnes has become distressed, and feels inadequate as a reaction to her husband Harold's fertile imagination and creative focus. Agnes's obsession with the cinema and television as essentially visual, not narrative, stimuli focuses her understanding of reality onto a perfection of the image. Her suicide is her attempt to return to a narrative understanding and creation, but her departure is focused on the attainment of projected visual pleasure:

[...] he found Agnes lying on the sofa in the living-room, dressed in her favourite princess-style emerald taffeta evening gown, pale and lovely as a blown lily, eyes shut, an empty pillbox and an overturned water tumbler on the rug at her side. Her tranquil features were set in a slight, secret smile of triumph, as if, in some far country unattainable to mortal men, she were, at last, waltzing with the dark, red-caped prince of her early dreams. (1986:55)

Here is an emblematic image from a woman's magazine with a Plathian disruption. Harold is out of focus; his gaze is on Agnes, focusing her for the reader, while he is peripheral. The concentration is on the perfection of the image that Agnes has created. Her closed eyes suggest her availability and passivity; her dress is exquisite; she is reclining; she is granted the perfect magazine narrative description of 'pale and lovely as a blown lily'. Harold is looking at her, she is not looking at anyone, and the reader can image and view the scene with the supposed pleasure found in women's magazines. This is one of the central connections between Plath's work and women's magazines. Both require a shared knowledge and dialogue, especially in the visual sense, for an understanding of the narratives, and this connection is usually female. Plath's work invites a gendered understanding of the mechanisms of the gaze in the same way that women's magazines rely on the knowledge and shared fantasies of their readers. Plath does not fully accept this gaze nor present it. In 'The Wishing Box', the addition of the empty pillbox and the overturned tumbler introduces elements to the image which introduce another fantasy; the relationship between a feminine sensibility and suicide. In Agnes's last, everlasting image the reflected perfection of death flows into the woman reader who looks at the women models. The fascination and attraction of these women is a question of identification and desire. Their still frozen poses, capturing the women in a model position, contribute to the fascination with this unattainable perfection, a perfection Plath's narrative suggests is possible through death.

While 'The Wishing Box' explores the image of the frozen perfected female in relation to the male gaze and extreme

passivity, Plath's much later poem 'Edge' moves this discussion into a more provocative discourse. 'Edge' further investigates the relationship between the ideal image of a receptive woman and her death mask. 'Edge' describes the woman perfected in death and the frozen permanency of this image is related to the perfection of photography. Death is anonymity and ironically provides the ultimate receptor for the male gaze: there is no longer any possibility of an outward or self-reflexive gaze, only the absorption of another's look. Ironically, 'Edge' seems to deny an interested male gaze. 'Edge' does not engage in the kind of aggressive defiance and attraction found in 'Lady Lazarus', but yet through its extreme resignation to the role of woman as symbol, subtly denies it. 'Edge' partly engages with Edgar Allan Poe's famous assertion: 'the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world - and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topics are those of a bereaved lover' (1986:486). 'Edge' does not include the male presence which Poe finds necessary to provide meaning to the female death. Plath provides meaning within a female circle, the containment of the poem and the gaze is detached from the need for a masculine interpretation. 'Edge' corresponds with the single woman who looks out of the magazines, who throws out a variety of ambiguous fantasies to the reader and is not interpreted within the text. 'Edge' contains a woman who is objectifying herself, creating her own understanding of perfection in an atmosphere of inevitability. The moon is the only spectator, the image of female identification who recognizes the inevitability of attainable perfection. Plath does not reverse the objectification of the gaze or assertively subvert it, but she removes it from a

purely aesthetic understanding and places it into an understanding of the female fantasy of utter subjection.

Margaret Walters recognizes the traditional limitation on women's sexual involvement in looking and the society's insistence on their position as object and not spectator:

But even today, a woman is expected to take a narcissistic pleasure in fulfilling male fantasies rather than exploring and acting out her own. There is still a rigid division between the sex that looks and the sex that is looked at. (1978:17)

This is a very interesting statement. Walters recognizes the limited subject/object division and goes on to suggest that this should be cancelled or at least equalled by a female gaze. Although largely concerned with the perception of the male body, Walters does reflect briefly on the relationship between the spectator woman and women's magazines' fashion features:

Interestingly the female pinup is also used to persuade women to buy. Some of the barest and most blatantly sexy nudes appear in the glossy women's magazines; they play and prey on women's narcissism, their vague envies, their endless dissatisfaction with their bodies, their Cinderella dreams [...] A pinup is far more than just a nude female: she incarnates femininity. And femininity, presented as natural, is, in fact, thoroughly artificial, something that has to be worked at, produced, maintained. It is a luxury good that can be bought. The pinup symbolizes women's dreams of a

transformed and fulfilled life; she is endlessly fascinating because she is elusive - because no woman can ever achieve that ideal femininity and no man can truly possess it.
(1978:291)

Walters identifies the pleasure and presence of female models and increasingly nude women in women's magazines as both a consumer desire and an envy. The association of femininity and consumerism is suggestive but the suggestion does not clarify the specific appeal of the visual for women. In recent years the position of the model has practically eclipsed the commercial product, until the woman actually becomes the product. This suggests a focus on the individual and the pleasure of the look which moves beyond the clothes being sold and perhaps accounts for the pleasure that women continue to find in women's magazines.

But, of course, we still do not really know enough about how women, in the context of women's magazines, see women. *Ladies' Home Journal*, when asked this question, gave a shaded answer. In the March 1952 issue a reader asked:

Please explain why you almost always put a woman's picture on the cover of a magazine published especially for women. The majority of the members of my club, which discusses psychological subjects, feel that a magazine for women should use pictures of 'glamour' *men* on the cover. [...] All members say the women's pictures give them a twinge of unhappiness, because they are not as young and pretty as the glamourized illustration. Some say they turn

the magazine cover side down when not in use, so as not to be reminded of their own inferiority in comparison. some of the wives say they tear off the cover and destroy it so their husbands will not make 'odious comparisons', or wish they had *that* girl instead of her. (LHJ 1952b:6)

For a psychological club, these women seem unable to recognize ambiguity or contained contradiction. Although their point that cover girls can create feelings of inferiority, that, as Walters understands it, their femininity is unattainable, is justifiable, it does not admit the popularity of the female image. There appears to be a desire, parallel to the tricks and illusions of commercialism, for women to look at pictures of women. *Ladies' Home Journal's* reply to this letter adopts their superior yet patient tone: 'Wise and wonderful creatures, men are more monotonous than women. Best reason we hear for not using "glamour men" (if such there be) on the cover: "They would look so silly." Ed.' (LHJ 1952b:6). This answer reinforces Walters assertion that women are incapable, through conditioning, of viewing men as objects. According to *Ladies' Home Journal*, for a man to be posed and objectified as women are would be 'silly'. Twenty-five years after this rejection of glamour men, the unpopularity of *Cosmopolitan's* experimental male pinup, an experiment conducted in the wake of contemporary feminism, suggests that women enjoy the objectification of women more than that of men.

Plath can also display aggression in the understanding of the gaze. The most intense presentation of this gaze, of this degree of objectification, is to be found in 'Lady Lazarus'. Within the

narrative of the poem, the function of looking is central to Lady Lazarus's presentation of herself. Within the context of the poem she presents herself through a visual discussion. She describes her physical appearance with a concentration on creating the visual image, presenting her physical self:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? -
(1988:244)

Her address 'Oh my enemy' indicates an audience which seems to be a watching audience, who have to pay attention to her physical appearance. Only the reader is listening to the voice, the people within the poem are transfixed by her appearance:

So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby
(1988:246)

The seductiveness of Lady Lazarus's voice, her soothing accusations, suggests the focus on her appearance; her voice is really only listened to in connection with the fascination over her appearance. She is addressing males, she is even bewitching them, and within the poem, she is positioned as an object. Her outward gaze is of no value; only the gaze which is reflected onto her is described through the concentration on her appearance. Yet, as in the narrative of women's magazines, the person or more specifically, the man who is throwing the gaze towards Lady Lazarus, is not the focus for the look of the spectator but acts as a focuser on to the female. Lady Lazarus interprets herself as an image; she describes her appearance with detachment. As with the narrative of women's magazines, she is creating herself as a text and fantasy. The crowd of gazers who want to see this woman are in search of a sensationalist fix:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot -
The big strip-tease.
Gentlemen, ladies
(1988:245)

The objectification and sexuality of the woman attracts the gaze of both sexes. Plath's imagery is rooted in the oppressors as

spectator, but with the added tension of the oppressed as a deliberate exhibitionist. The suggested perversions of Walters which arise from the sexuality of the gaze appear to be justified. But an outlet for strength in the female position of exhibitionist can be identified. The gaze on to the persona is from various directions, and it is from this objectified, sexual position that Lady Lazarus becomes empowered by the force of acknowledging and returning the look. She plays with the positioning of the look and attention. Plath has a distressed relationship with the machinations of the gaze and the focus and concentration on the female. Lady Lazarus moves through being the woman who is locked within the narrative, catching and reflecting the gaze and fantasy, into the position of looking, both within the narrative and out of the narrative. The gaze must meet the reader and this is the point at which it must become interpreted. As the fashion model's direct gaze can be ambiguous and reinterpreted, Lady Lazarus's gaze conveys an aggressive sexuality which allows for reaction, for fantasy or aggression.

The responses demanded by 'Lady Lazarus' feed into the other option for the presentation of women in women's magazines' fashion spreads; the woman who looks out of the magazine and engages the reader in a more direct relationship. In the same issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* as the Pepsi advertisement, the feature 'Your Prettiest Dress' offers fashion models with their gaze directed towards the reader, encouraging eye contact. The implied fictions of these fashion features are more ambiguous, less linear and lacking a clear narrative, without the presence of a male. The looks are typical coyly seductive invitations, a contradiction which encapsulates the guarded sexuality found in

women's magazines. The model's look always seems to be addressed towards a man but this can only be a definite conclusion if the situation is placed in a heterosexual context. This is obviously the intention of these magazines, where all editorial is written from this premise. The fashion pictures, however, cannot be limited to this defined sexuality as their meaning is governed by image and not text. The fashion models are actually meeting their gaze with the gaze of women readers and the models' expressions of invitation and desire are read by them. This relationship can be a form of attraction or rejection or perhaps both. Attraction arises from a feeling of reception of the invitation while rejection comes from a feeling of inadequacy in comparison but this must also contain longing for identification.

From these examples concerning the direction and control of the gaze in women's magazines, there arises a complex and under developed situation. The question of how women look at women is one which has been limited, and, to a certain extent, simplified, in the need to accommodate the discussion to an understanding of gender conflict and the gaze. Laura Mulvey's work revolves around an understanding of the cinema but her theories can be applied to women's magazines' fashion photography, partly because of the magazines' emphasis on narrative. Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' discusses the relationship between spectator and image as one of sexual tension and projection:

[...] the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer. (1989:17)

The female is usually positioned and imagined in Mulvey's essay as the performer with the male as the spectator: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female, which is styled accordingly.' (1989:19). The female spectator is a position which is largely ignored: their understanding of cinema is recognized as a temporary adoption of the male viewpoint. Mulvey's later article 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)', modifies her earlier conclusions about the woman spectator. She considers: '(the "women in the audience" issue), whether the female spectator is carried along, as it were by the scruff of the text, or whether her pleasure can be more deep-rooted and complex.' (1989:29). Mulvey's answer, perhaps because it is connected to an interpretation of *Duel in the Sun*, is unsatisfactory as an understanding of the female active gaze. She suggests that the female spectator's identification with the central female performer allows both to undergo a masculinization process which is ultimately not accepted as empowerment since it is only temporary: 'So too, is the female spectator's fantasy of masculinization at cross-purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes.' (1989:37). Mulvey does not identify any positive female involvement concerning the gaze of woman onto woman.

Women's Worlds is a study which considers theories of text and culture in relation to women's magazines. The section titled 'Subjectivity and the gaze' reiterates previous theories by Mulvey,

Kaplan and Holland. The conclusion that the authors draw is the consideration that:

If we reject the assumption that women only look at women in terms of identification, however, we must entertain the possibility that the woman magazine reader's gaze may in fact be desirous. She may desire the woman represented, rather than to be *like* the woman. In other words to what extent do we wish to read the female gaze as lesbian? The proven failure of the 'male pin-up' in the women's magazine, experimented with in *Cosmopolitan*, would suggest that the female gaze must be interpreted either as the adoption of a masculine subject position in relation to the female image, or as an indicator of the continuing symmetry of the terms 'woman' and 'commodity', even for women themselves. (Ballaster 1991:38)

The alignment of a lesbian position with the adoption of a masculine subject position seems to limit this part of the investigation. It does not allow for the recognition of a separate female subject position in its own right, unless it is the inability to separate woman from commodity, the susceptibility to consumer favours. Since the medium of cinema would seem to be controlled by the masculine, only offering a restricted female subject position, cinema theory does not provide the tools for an investigation of the extent to which the gaze of women's magazines is designed for women. The authors do expand on their position with the statement: 'It will be obvious that we would resist the assumption that readers are simply victims of the

ideology inscribed in the texts they consume.' (Ballaster 1991:38). It would be restrictive to see women as solely the objectified victims of a femininity constructed by women's magazines, although within this era and context, it is a justifiable conclusion.

Any consideration of the lone woman who looks out of the women's magazines to meet the gaze of the woman reader, must include the element of uncertainty which induces an exploration of gender expectations. The fiction which is implied by the direct desirous gaze of the model is, within the shared knowledge of the magazine and its readers, aimed at a shared ideal male, a narrative which is understood by the reader and the magazine. However, this implied fiction is inherently ambiguous as the absence of this fantasy male, in contrast to the fashion features which use male models, results in a narrative which is uncertain. All that is definite is the desire and invitation of the female model, not specifically who that need is directed towards. The element of uncertainty, the disjuncture between what is recognizably acceptable and what is justifiably possible, is a confusion of approach which Plath exploits in the poem 'Leaving Early'.

The poem offers the early morning thoughts of a speaker after a night at a Lady's apartment:

Lady, your room is lousy with flowers.
When you kick me out, that's what I'll remember,
(1988:145)

This opening implies a casual encounter and introduces a hint about the meaning of the evening. The speaker has stayed

the night in the Lady's apartment and the sexual imagery surrounding the speaker's description of the room implies a sexual involvement between the two people. The speaker is positioned as almost peripheral; central to conveying the narrative, yet secretive and shadowed. The apartment, however, reflects the emotions, and a claustrophobic atmosphere is created by the sexual imagery of the flowers; their scent and sight:

The red geraniums I know.
 Friends, friends. They stink of armpits
 And the involved maladies of autumn,
 Musky as a lovebed the morning after.
 (188:146)

'Stink of armpits' and 'musky as a lovebed' suggests a scene which can only be remembered and spoken of through the feminine metaphoric presence of the red geraniums. The intimacy of a desire which has turned sour is suggested. The way in which the speaker is surrounded, almost captured, by the 'jungle of wine-bottle lamps', the 'white china flying fish', and the flowers, indicates their uncertainty, the discomfort and fear of waiting. The speaker describes the room with an unfamiliar eye. The concentration on objects, the slightly mocking tone combined with the feeling of attachment and inability to leave, suggests the youth of the speaker, contrasting the older, distinguished yet strangely dishevelled title of 'Lady'. The apartment reveals its corporeality while it watches and observes itself and the speaker:

[...] The milky berries
 Bow down, local constellation,
 Towards their admirers in the tabletop:
 Mobs of eyeballs looking up.

[...]

Now I'm stared at
 By chrysanthemums the size
 Of Holofernes' head, dipped in the same
 Magenta as this fubsy sofa.
 In the mirror their doubles back them up.
 (1988:145-46)

The lady is sleeping, 'nose to the wall', but through the description of the apartment, she is a presence in the poem. Her stillness and the classic pose of closed eyes and unconsciousness places her as central, as the focus which is delaying the action, who, through sleeping, is controlling the other person. By positioning the lady as sleeping she is seen as suspending the text. The sense of hesitation and suspension is reflected in the attention to detail, the slow passing of time, the concentration on the surrounding environment. Within the apartment, the speaker becomes part of the ornaments, part of this lady's paraphernalia. While the speaker is describing what they see, they are also being watched as the flowers silently and metaphorically gaze upon them. The poem is creating a narrative which the speaker does not clearly state nor describe,

yet through the apartment, the reader's recreated eye sees and is able to construct a denied narrative. It is the flowers that suggest the redirection of the gaze by indicating the speaker not as an observer but part of the discourse. As the focus is turned on the speaker, their gender is still uncertain. The sexual atmosphere of the poem and of the apartment suggests who the chrysanthemums are staring at. The language of the poem revolves around female imagery and smells:

Velvet pillows the colour of blood pudding

[...]

The roses in the Toby jug

Gave up the ghost last night. High time.

Their yellow corsets were ready to split.

(1988:145-46)

The description of the flowers, overpowering and heavily scented, connects them to traditional representations of female sexuality. The personified undressing of the roses complements the growing perception that the involvement with the lady has a sexual dimension. 'Velvet pillows the colour of blood pudding' is an intriguing line, and one which demonstrates the degree to which Plath explores the boundaries of vocabulary. Blood pudding is another name for black pudding but blood sausage is the usual US or Canadian name. Plath's choice of blood pudding, and not the American blood sausage, is more suggestive. Blood pudding implies on a

literal level, a distaste; a combination of words which are contradictory. The sweet idea of pudding and the clotting of blood are not complementary. There seems, within the poetic vocabulary of Plath, something particularly feminine and sexual about this usage. A consistent connection between food and eating and Plath's images of bloody mouths can be identified. 'Ariel' describes the berries:

Nigger-eye
 Berries cast dark
 Hooks -
 Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
 Shadows.
 (1988:239)

'Poppies in July' reflects this disturbing connection between blood and mouths:

And it exhausts me to watch you
 Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouse

 A mouth just bloodied.
 Little bloody skirts!
 (1988:203)

The dark gleefulness of 'Childless Woman' revels in disturbing imagery:

Uttering nothing but blood-

Taste it, dark red!

And my forest

My funeral,

And this hill and this

Gleaming with the mouth of corpses.

(1988:259)

Angela Carter in her article, 'The Wound in the Face', discusses the changing fashions of the female face and the implications in relation to a visual interpretation of femininity. Her comments seem to draw together tensions present in Plath's imagery:

We are so used to the bright red mouth we no longer see it as the wound it mimics, except in the treacherous lucidity of paranoia. [...] Now the mouth is back as a bloody gash, a visible wound. This mouth bleeds over everything, cups, ice-cream, table napkins, towels. Mary Quant has a shade called (of course) 'Bloody Mary', to ram the point home. We will leave our bloody spoor behind us, to show we have been there. (1992:99)

The connection between the mouth and menstruation, the combination of eating and wounding feeds into Plath's language. The description she uses is a food which introduces the element of eating which complicates the sexual dimension and pressure of the poem. These tensions of violence, femininity and sexuality explain the 'blood pudding' imagery

and the general distaste and revulsion combined with resignation and resisted attraction that 'Leaving Early' displays towards women. And it is from this situation that the puzzle of who this gaze and evaluation is focused upon, arises.

'Leaving Early' poses to the reader a confusion and uncertainty over gender, or perhaps more accurately, disguises and avoids it. The sex of the speaker is never stated, but the poem does perhaps hint at their sexuality. The poem's final question is startling:

[...] Lady, what am I doing
 With a lung full of dust and a tongue of wood,
 Knee-deep in the cold and swamped by flowers?
 (1988:146)

Indications of desire are replaced by repulsion, and a child-like need for an explanation of this musty, feminine, claustrophobic room. Confusion not over what has happened but why and how it happened confirms the inexperience of the speaker, their isolation and mixed feelings. The speaker is over-powered by this Lady, even while she is asleep. The sexual images of this poem, the accent on red and perfume, the mustiness and quietness of the morning, disclose the sexual involvement of the evening, and the reader assumes the speaker to be male. The idea that this is the voice of a gigolo would seem feasible but the speaker's failed attempts at detachment suggests a younger person, an uncertain person. In contrast to the atmosphere of 'Leaving Early', Plath's later

poem 'Gigolo' presents a more aggressive and assured reaction than this speaker's:

The tattle of my
Gold joints, my way of turning
Bitches to ripples of silver
Rolls out a carpet, a hush.
(1988:268)

The cruel confidence of the gigolo is not found in 'Leaving Early'. This may alternatively be a young man in a sexual experience but this would be an unusual poetic voice for Plath. The imagery of the poem is fully concentrated on the feminine, there are no traditionally masculine references. The gender of the speaker is elusive but it is a traditionally feminine associated reaction, an uncertainty and fear, a confusion over a new sexual experience which was not what was expected. The confused feelings expressed in the final question combined with the melancholic weight of the poem, offers the possibility that the speaker is a woman. Janice Markey interprets 'Leaving Early' within a lesbian context, reading the situation as the voice of a woman who has just experienced her first lesbian sexual experience. She supports this with references from Plath's *Journals* which she claims cohere to a lesbian dialogue:

I imagined the situation of two lesbians: the one winning a woman with child from an apparently happy marriage. Why is it impossible to think of two women of middle-

age living together without lesbianism the solution, the motive? (Plath 1987:329)

Markey's is perhaps too bold a statement and conclusion. 'Leaving Early' seems more concerned with creating ambiguity, in disguising meaning than in telling a story. The confusion over the speaker's gender and the instability of this identity connects 'Leaving Early' to the available social expressions of the time. The difficulty of expressing sexuality outside the rigid boundaries of heterosexuality, is reflected in the ambiguous discourse of this poem. In 'Leaving Early' readers may assume the accepted male gender but a pervasive uncertainty remains. This ambiguity, the absence of a decisive link between what is seen and what is reflected, corresponds with the ambiguity involved in reading the female image in women's magazines. The ambiguity of which gender is being addressed combines with the uncertainty of the sexuality which is being viewed. The commitment that women's magazines have to heterosexuality can be replaced by an acknowledgement of the purely visual pleasure that they offer. The satisfaction provided by the perfected image of women, as well as raising the question of address and gaze, also contains a consideration of identity and desire, the need to see a reflected image of how one desires to be. But there is always a dislocation and discomfort in the glamour model as a reflection, as an image of how women should be. The act of viewing contains a combination of two selves, of the real and the representational.

Photography in women's magazines is concerned with the construction and depiction of ideal women. Plath's poem 'Strumpet Song' is concerned with the dislocation between knowledge of self and the perception of others. Plath explores the contradictions of the image of the ideal woman in 'Strumpet Song', revealing a bitterness towards this dichotomy of the self. The strumpet of the poem is a 'foul slut', a description which often arises from a visual evaluation. The speaker describes her as attractive to men:

Mere bruit of her takes our street
 Until every man,
 Red, pale or dark,
 Veers to her slouch.
 (1988:33)

The speaker's dislike and disgust of the woman is reflected in the description of her:

Mark, I cry, that mouth
 Made to do violence on,
 That seamed face
 Askew with blotch, dint, scar
 Struck by every dour year.
 (1988:33-4)

The 'seamed face' combines images of violence and repair with a doll face, seamed and stitched. The anger expressed

towards this woman is revealed to be a bitterness towards an image, a construction:

To patch with brand of love this rank grimace
Which out from black tarn, ditch and cup
Into my most chaste own eyes
Looks up.
(1988:34)

The strumpet is the speaker, or she is part of the speaker's divided sense of self. The poem contains two women: the contradiction between 'foul slut' and 'most chaste own eyes' does not allow for a fusion between these two images; whether the strumpet is a reflection onto the self or of the self, the two remain separate. The reflection of the self is an image which the speaker is detached from and withdraws from recognizing as herself. The disgust that the speaker feels towards the strumpet is redirected towards herself, although she does not admit this, disguising the recognition with a sense of detachment and distance. Whether the woman is the strumpet or recognizes her reflection as mirroring this persona, she is split between the reality of her appearance and her perception of it: the contradiction between the image the magazines sometimes offered and the behaviour they proposed. In a journal entry from 1950, Plath describes getting ready for a date:

I dressed slowly, smoothing, perfuming, powdering. I sat upstairs in the moist grey twilight, with the rain trickling

down outside, while the family talked and laughed with company down on the porch. This is I, I thought, the American virgin, dressed to seduce. I know I'm in for an evening of sexual pleasure. We go on dates, we play around, and if we're nice girls, we demure [sic] at a certain point. And so it goes. (1987:9)

The implication of nice girls and bad girls and the combination of seductress and virgin is the contradiction that the magazines' fashion pages contained. The encouraged appearance, whether this was a college look or an evening seductress, was designed to attract men but the dictated behaviour for nice girls was not to indulge in the capture, and if so, only through marriage. The September 1949 issue of *Mademoiselle* features an advertisement for 'Gay Baby panties in all nylon' which contains the contradiction of the feminine projected image:

Enticingly sheer, enchantingly shirred, woven to hug snug with Latex. They'll stay saucy enough to spank through scores of washings ... dry in a wind ... need no ironing. (*Mlle* 1949b:84)

Confusion exists over the implied purpose of this underwear, and an underlying sexual connotation. The sensible consideration of ironing is combined with images of spanking. It is a feature of the magazines' advertisements to play with the language of vaguely kinky sex, with men tied up and women blindfolded being a common illustration. This rhetoric

is, however, contained within the perfect American virgin, whose transmitted image is not supposed to align with her principles, unless married. This can have the effect of creating a confused expression of a sexual identity.

In relation to this image of women's split sexual identity, the speaker of 'Strumpet Song' experiences a disjuncture between her outward appearance and her sense of herself; a contradiction between appearance and the boundaries of behaviour. The speaker is watching herself, or the token of herself, without recognizing the wholeness of the image. She can only see her strumpet self and can only acknowledge this self in a male circle. The reflection that she sees is one constructed to address men, the image that the male gaze objectifies. But the eyes that look back into this reflection are a woman's; it is her own reflection that causes this disjuncture as it is a masculine and manufactured construction of herself. A similar uncertainty of what is reflected, an unwillingness to recognize a reflection, is found in Plath's poem 'Lorelei':

[...] Yet these shapes float

Up towards me, troubling the face
Of quiet. From the nadir
They rise, their limbs ponderous

With richness, hair heavier
Than sculpted marble.

[...]

O river, I see drifting

Deep in your flux of silver

Those great goddesses of peace.

(1988:94-5)

The lorelei, the mermaids, come up towards the speaker, 'these shapes float up towards me'. This reflects the German legend of a siren who lures boatmen to destruction, but a diversion from this meaning is offered within the context of the poem. As well as a myth which lures boatmen, a siren is also a dangerously alluring or seductive woman. A lorelei or siren contains a masculine fear of women's power, of the ability to attract and destroy. This has an interesting parallel to Plath's image of the 'American virgin' and the dangers for males who become involved in this relationship. The secret desire to seduce, a sexual energy which had to be contained and suppressed, could be destructive. The 'me' of the poem could be assumed to be the traditional male victim of lorelei, as the shapes float up and attract the speaker, but again Plath is ambiguous about reflections. It is a woman being lured by the lorelei, by the idea of the female image as illusionary, possessed by transitory goddesses, and the detachment from a male fantasy and desire is significant. The sirens are depicted as attractive and inspirational for women, although this is expressed through a regretful desire. The allure of the sea nymphs, their 'sculpted marble' hair, illustrates their otherworldliness, their unattainable status, yet their position as

symbols of women. A parallel exists between this relationship and the reader's relationship with the 'great goddesses' of women's magazines: the impossibility of perfection combined with the desire to join, to be these women that are untouchable, that lie below a glossy surface, whether it is a film of water or a camera lens.

Duality

The images of women found in women's magazines and the connotations of the gaze, also provoke a consideration of duality. The reflections found in 'Lorelei' and 'Strumpet Song' relate to the act of looking at the perfected woman in the magazine but they are also reflections and mirror images. The reflected image is different from the actual image and the woman is shown to be divided between the two. The magazines present this as a feasible contradiction and it would appear, through the popularity of perfected women in magazines, that a satisfaction is found through this, even a fantasy release; yet Plath's presentation and understanding of the mirror image is more complex than a wished for reflection.

A trend found in 1950s women's magazines, and beyond, is to employ the gimmick of the mirror image. The occasional feature of models as twin images, identical postures and clothes, each pleasingly complementary to her double, is a dialogue which Plath's writing reflects. There was also a prevalence of either/or scenarios, where readers are presented with the choice of which woman they are. Whether the woman

is split into two opposing images, or duplicated into two perfect and complementary images, she is consistently divided. This discourse, both visual and textual, suggests the difficulty of creating a wholeness between image and perception. One of the prevalent metaphors during the time that Plath was reading women's magazines is the woman who operates within a form of duality.

Much of Plath's work moves within this rhetoric of doubling and duality, creating a discourse with women's magazines which inadvertently reflects the crisis of a woman's perception of the self. The belief in the ability to construct and control a self is contradictorily undermined by the discourses that the magazines engage in. The idea of the complete woman is enforced by the adherence to a pre-defined role model, a justification of self which depends on the woman's relationship with other people, mainly male. It is important that when the magazines do attempt to move into discussions which deal with the individual self, their rhetoric is concerned with duality.

Seventeen's article 'If you think you're not pretty' claims to be a feature about beauty which remains within the expected realms of the magazine's editorial. The article's approach to beauty improvement, however, reveals its concern with the reader's self-image and self-confidence. It manipulates the idea of physical appearance so that it also contains a focus on mental stability. The accompanying illustration is a photograph of a girl, her back to the reader, looking out of a curtained window with a hand mirror turned away in her hand. The article combines the language of division and reflection when suggesting that no girl witnesses her 'loveliest moments':

For they aren't in your *mirror*, when you think you see yourself. They're in your *other self* - the one that never visits the mirror, sometimes because you're too happy, sometimes because you're too busy, mostly because you aren't thinking of how you look, but only of how you feel. (SV 1956b:76)

This encouraged division between the self in the mirror and another self presents the idea that the woman is divided, unable to reconcile her two selves:

It's too bad that you never really see yourself - but see only this small fraction of you that comes to stare and criticize the mirror-face. (SV 1956b:76)

This article implies a fracturing within the self and the inability of women to be whole. Her reflection is shown as a very important part of herself, but implies that it is a part not to be trusted nor believed. The division within the woman is really a power battle between two rivals for the supremacy of the body, and this is a struggle frequently found in Plath's writing.

Plath's poem 'The Rival' introduces the power of the destructive woman by paralleling her with the moon. This traditional image of women, which itself is contradictory in its symbolization of purity and revulsion, is aligned with the rival:

If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.

You leave the same impression
 Of something beautiful, but annihilating.
 (1988:166)

The choice of 'resemble' suggests reflection and doubling but this parallel between the woman and the moon draws in as the poem progresses and the atmosphere becomes increasingly claustrophobic. The speaker's knowledge of the rival, her understanding of her, illustrates the closeness of their relationship. The final lines illuminate the nature of their bond:

No day is safe from news of you,
 Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me.
 (1988:167)

A struggle exists between these two women, the rival appearing as strong and controlling while the speaker is passive and ineffectual. These feelings are contained within a restrictive space, limiting any division between the two, so that they appear increasingly as one person. The women are resigned to these interdependent roles. The way in which the relationship is sustained is important:

Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,
 Arrive through the mailslot with loving regularity,
 White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.
 (1988:166)

The rival sends letters, sustaining her presence in image form. She arrives symbolically through the 'mailslot'. The dependency and hatred of these roles is signalled by the 'loving regularity' and 'carbon monoxide'. Within the popular feminine rhetoric of this context, the rival and the speaker express an inescapable and necessary bond. They are the siren and the chaste woman of Plath's other doubles. 'The Rival' expresses the difficulty but need to maintain this division and to contain it.

'The Rival' encapsulates two images of women, supposedly the chaste woman and her sexual rival. This reflects the magazines' clear division between 'good girls' and 'bad girls'. In a *Seventeen* feature addressed to the role of the daughter, a father worries

This boy you went out with - what sort of boy is he. Is he a *nice* boy? What *is* a nice boy? Does he realize that *you're* a nice girl? What is a nice girl? (SV 1955a:132)

This sexual dilemma, and the confusion over what merits a *nice* girl or boy, is an issue which Esther in *The Bell Jar* encounters, illustrating how the novel reflects its era's concerns. The sexual expression of the woman exists only as a division, which results in the rhetoric of doubling. The doubling of Esther, within herself and other characters, is a troubled reflection onto the magazines' sense of wholeness. The disjunction between images of duality and wholeness is resolved in the magazines through the presentation of choice and although Esther rejects much of the magazines' ethos she

still exists as an either/or conundrum. Esther has to ultimately make the right choices to be able to leave her institutionalized life. Although Doctor Nolan encourages sexual freedom, this is a freedom of a private, secretive nature and it is Esther's outward, public return to normality that guarantees her release:

My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. (1980:257)

Esther still reflects the women's magazines in that she is prepared to return to this life and realizes that any deviance must be secret. Esther makes her choice through a network of psychotherapy, an attitude which the women's magazines, as part of their self-help ethos, often adopt when introducing a discourse of choice, a chance to supposedly choose between the doubles.

Seventeen featured the article 'The Seventeen Look: You can have it in a week - Beauty is a matter of either ... or ...' (SV 1955a:56-59). The article went through the week with an either/or choice. For Monday: 'Either you eat like a beauty ... or you aren't one.' and for Wednesday: 'Your hair - Either its your crowning glory ... or your greatest embarrassment.' These choices are each accompanied by two photographs of a model illustrating the success of one choice and the beauty failure of the other. These two opposing images, which feature the same model, suggest that potentially every woman is one or the other. In *Seventeen* women have the capacity to contain these

two opposing figures but to present only one. This is a prevalent suggestion in women's magazines and is often accompanied by strong visuals; illustrations which imply a certain instability and amorphism of self. The women of these magazines are constantly shifting, whether through changing fashions, or through the possibility of changing the self that women's magazines constantly offer, or of choosing between the doubles that every woman supposedly contains. Although the magazines were not consciously commenting on the presentation and understanding of women in America during this time, they were reinforcing expectations of femininity by limiting women's choices to ideal or failure. Plath, often through a familiar rhetoric, exploits the most distressing manifestations of this opposition.

Plath's poem 'In Plaster' exploits the magazines' 'either/or' rhetoric. In Plath's *Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes's notes offer a biographical explanation for the poem:

In March of this year SP spent a week in hospital undergoing an appendectomy. The patient in complete plaster lay on a neighbouring bed. (1988:291).

This almost seems to interpret Plath's writing as if it were a diary. This link to personal experience restricts the poem, limiting a possible dialogue with external discussion. 'In Plaster' is superficially a consideration of being encased in plaster in a hospital situation, but this scene suggests images of constriction and confinement and, most centrally, of a separation or duplication of the self:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
 This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,
 And the white person is certainly the superior one.
 She doesn't need food, she is one of the real saints.
 At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality -
 She lay in bed with me like a dead body
 And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was

Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.
 (1988:158)

This image of two women, two separate people, suggests the choice of the women's magazines; the choice between being new and white or old and yellow. The language of opposition is persistent in the magazines' features and in their advertisements:

Halo leaves hair cleaner, softer, brighter - than any oily, greasy, soapy shampoo. (SV 1955a:22)

It is consistently stressed that a woman's whole being depends on the choices she makes, and there are only ever two choices. The speaker of 'In Plaster' appears to be one of these choices:

She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
 (1988:160)

The opposition that Plath constructs plays into the language and choices of women's magazines, the limits of women, the games of nice girls and bad girls. 'In Plaster' connects with the discourse of women's magazines since, although the speaker often describes the two as separate, they are also a duplication. 'There are two of me now' speaks of the separation of the one person, the duplication of basically the same image but significantly changed. The voice that is heard is the yellow person, but the white one is also a part of her, she is a copy of her: 'she was shaped just the way I was'. As in *Seventeen's* either/or pictures it is the same woman, but different. Plath uses the visual impact of the magazines and their advice but subverts their system of strength. 'In Plaster' gives a voice to the other women who appears in the women's magazines but never speaks, who is only ever there as an example of how not to be; the model to struggle against. This choice connects a woman's appearance with her value.

Doll Woman

The development of the doll-like woman, the mannequin, exacerbates the pressure of self identity, and was heavily featured in the advertisements in the magazines. *Mademoiselle's* Valentine issue from 1952 included the advert:

Très Secrète (very secret) Inflatable Bra: Makes all other ways to a lovely natural bustline old-fashioned!

(*Mlle* 1952a:157)

It seems innocuous to describe such an artificial product as 'natural'. Advertisers defined true femininity as a construction, as a role or outfit which is adopted by women to turn them into fantasy products of what they already are: women. Coty '24' was a lipstick that stayed on overnight: 'You wake up beautiful with flattering color still on your lips.' (SV 1955a:42). Images of artificially constructed and aided women reflects onto the centrality that is given to appearance and conformity. The creation and continuation of fantasy reduces the presentation and perception of women to dolls, to play-mates, actively encouraging them to objectify themselves. The creation of an artificial beauty encourages sex without interaction: women are replaced by mannequins. The prevalence of images of dolls in the magazines reinforces the connection between their status as controllable, objectified non-entities with the physical depiction of women. Yardley's advertising campaign features dolls in realistic poses, symbolizing the woman's perfection. The more disturbing advertisements depict women as half dolls, almost totally objectified and plasticized but still human. A clothes advertisement from May 1956 has the caption: 'The Carole King Juniors girls are adorable in Embroidered Cottons.' (SV 1956d:56). 'Adorable' seems a strange description of the three girls in the accompanying photograph. They are posing like mannequins wearing painted masks with wide eyes and pursed lips, but the expressionless masks are merged onto the bodies to look real. They look like the actual heads to the bodies. In August 1949 *Mademoiselle* included an advertisement which reflects the campus popularity of the magazine but also inadvertently suggests the uneasy relationship between a woman's ability and

her choices. A banner lies across the advert with the slogan 'Phi Beta Barbizon' and the caption: 'College choice for smooth lines good tailoring, perfect fit!' promoting Barbizon lingerie (*Mlle* 1949a:47). The illustration is of straw dummy women with no mouths. The incongruous connection between articulate college women and straw dolls exposes the conception of women as controllable and desirable dolls; the consumer attraction of the advertisement convincing women to support and perpetuate this perception.

The parodying and subversion of this rhetoric and presentation is widely found in Plath's writing. While other areas of society were reflecting this treatment of women, such as the cinema or actual experiences of inequality, the visual and rhetorical impact of women's magazines appears to be the most explicit and even surrealist representation, which relates to Plath's imagination.

In *The Bell Jar* Esther becomes involved with Doreen, another of the girls who won the competition to work for the women's magazine:

I'd never known a girl like Doreen before. Doreen came from a society girls' college down South and had bright white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles, hard and polished and just about as indestructible, and a mouth set in a sort of perpetual sneer. (1980:4-5)

Doreen is described as being like a doll: she encapsulates the ideal artificial woman with her bright white hair and blue eyes. There is, however, a hardness like the limbs of a plastic doll: her

eyes are 'transparent agate marbles' and she is 'just about indestructible'. Doreen can be seen to resemble life but does not contain a realistic concept of it. She is like the advertisements which merge images of women with images of dolls to create a perfect hybrid woman. Doreen's sexuality contains a falseness and a hardness; she is an artificial, pretend woman, a still image, her expression and mouth set as in a photograph.

Plath's exploitation of this desirable artificiality is also found in the poem 'The Applicant'. It begins with images of lack and loss, human gaps which need to be replaced by artificial parts:

Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,
(1988:221)

'Rubber breasts' recalls images of inflatable bras and the female perfection through outline. These images of human imperfection, of artificiality, of physical lack are replaced by a need to solve an emotional lack. The need for a wife, however, becomes a need for a possession, a personal objectified mannequin, the woman who will project a relaxing ideal: 'You have an eye, it's an image.' (1988:222). The poem plays with the language used to sell this woman, creating a consumer scenario. 'The Applicant' reflects Plath's absorption of advertising rhetoric, the way she combines the perfection of women with the language used by advertisements to sell this fantasy:

It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end

And dissolve of sorrow.

[...]

It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof

Against fire and bombs through the roof.

Believe me, they'll bury you in it.

(1988:221)

Whether it is a wife's soothing hand or a black wedding and funeral suit that is being sold, the rhetoric is the same. The image of a woman being purchased, in effect, reflects the way the women's magazines sold a positive idea of women and marriage through a consumer framework. Plath's satirical approach to the selling of the product of marriage in 'The Applicant', alludes to the replacement of women by their daughters, the ongoing process which sustains society. The wife who is offered to the applicant is, at first, only a hand which will perform marriage duties and is an illustration of the wife's subordinate position. This metonymic woman, being sold in salesman speak, is revealed to be part of an industry of regeneration:

We make new stock from the salt.

(1988:221)

The surreal quality of Plath's work is reflected in a silverwear advertisement from 1955 featured in *Seventeen*. The advertisement is headed with:

Introducing Silver Swirl an exciting new pattern bearing the greatest name in Sterling Silver ... Wallace. (SV 1955a:37)

This advertisement, and others that share the same rhetoric, inadvertently illustrate the limited sphere of women's lives and influence. Consumer choice is presented to the female reader as an 'exciting' and important decision. For women, the American ideal of freedom of choice was actually relegated to supermarket decisions. This simultaneous limiting of women's lives, while maintaining that shopping grants power and choice to the female consumer, is contained within the woman in 'The Applicant' who, through the perfection of her task, is content. The illustration for the silverwear advertisement is relevant to Plath's visual imagination. A bridegroom is standing at the foot of a red carpeted, regal staircase, his arm pointing up the stairs, controlling the direction of the bride's, and the reader's, gaze. The bride is kneeling before the stairs, in a state of reverence before a surreal vision of a giant silver knife, fork and spoon, much larger than the couple who are poised on the stairs. This image encourages and perpetuates the state of marriage as desirable through an equation between marriage and consumerism. The couple's marriage is sanctified by silverwear as much as the wedding vows. This insidious connection is also, more precisely, selling the role of wife to women readers through a concentration on the ceremony, on the occasion of the wedding rather than the reality

of relationships, as consumer products become totems in the distribution of power. It is the groom that seems to stand and guide the bride, offering this giant silverware service in exchange her service. This trade identifies the woman as a commodity worth the same as a silver dinner service.

The image and rhetoric of these advertisements are relevant to an understanding of Plath's visual imagination. There are echoes in the poem 'On Deck' :

And the white-haired jeweler from Denmark is carving
A perfectly faceted wife to wait
On him hand and foot, quiet as a diamond.
(1988:143)

The woman in 'The Applicant' is equated with the 'black and stiff' suit: it takes care of the man's appearance and the wife is to take care of his 'head'. The bride is practically stamped with a Good Housekeeping Seal, a guarantee of quality. 'The Applicant' parodies the traditional wedding anniversary gifts, seen as another reflection onto marriage as a form of consumerism:

Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
(1988:221)

The wife that is presented and given to the man is a perfected woman, a magazine wife who appears in women's magazines'

advertisements and features. Visually she is the doll woman, the epitome of artificial femininity which she combines with the ideal wife, subservient and serving:

A living doll, everywhere you look.

It can sew, it can cook,

It can talk, talk, talk.

(1988:221-2)

The overtones of the contemporary Cliff Richard hit single 'Living Doll' are clearly Plath's criticism of this popular cultural expression of longed for mechanical perfection. 'The Applicant', however, is not merely criticizing a masculine perception of woman. It appears to be more concerned with criticism of marriage itself and the role assigned to each sex within the institution. The interviewer is not identified as a man or a woman which suggests a concern with marriage as a manufactured product rather than a simple attack on sexual power.

The successful consumption of this product seems central. The poem is critical of the way in which people are easily manipulated through commercial rhetoric and promises. It does not seem to be an attack on the male psyche, rather a criticism of the establishment and institutions; and while this control may be masculine, it is the process of manipulating people into consumers which is attacked. The image of the mechanical woman feeds into the women who are constant presences in the women's magazines' advertisements, and, perhaps more objectionably, the magazines' editorials. The aims of advertising and the techniques it uses are not confined to merely selling a consumer product, but extend to

selling a created lifestyle, one constructed through consumer choices and designed to support the market. Betty Friedan in her discussion of 'The Sexual Sell' in *The Feminine Mystique* recognizes the extent to which the feminine fantasies of advertising are further cemented through the only recognizably, though admittedly restricted, female mediums:

But if the ads and commercials are a clear case of *caveat emptor*, the same sexual sell disguised in the editorial content of a magazine or a television program is both less ridiculous and more insidious. (1963:230)

The magazines' editorials sell the product of 1950s femininity in similar ways to the advertisers. The creature that emerges from the advertisers' dreams, a sanitized, passive, controllable woman, is also promoted through the editorials. Friedan's description of 'less ridiculous and more insidious' encapsulates the more subtle yet pervasive methods of the women's magazines.

Reinventing

The fantasy mannequin is complemented in the women's magazines by a simultaneous concentration on the reader's perfected female body. During this era, advertisements in the women's magazines promoting tablets and drinks for weight loss increased dramatically. The advertising of cosmetics is always heavily featured in these magazines, but it is the slimming features and advertisements that most dramatically illustrate the

concentration on youthfulness and perfection. Both sets of advertisements exploit notions of female duality but in subtly different ways. Cosmetic advertisements offer an alternative and improved self where slimming propaganda insists on the irrevocable discarding of an unacceptable self. Slimming is not about choosing between two internal perceptions of the self, but is concerned with shedding and reinventing selves through the physical body. The rhetoric and visual imagery of the approach towards slimming does not present the psychological battle which is engaged in with an either/or situation, but a feeling of renewal and rebirth. While Plath often presents this desire as a solution, she also recognizes the dangers in reinvention.

The July 1956 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* includes a feature advertisement titled: 'Fabulous Formula Diet'. Supposedly offering sincere advice, the feature claims:

Tastes as good as a milk shake - you can have your favourite flavours too! [...] By absolutely excluding all other foods and beverages you eliminate once and for all, the temptation to take some little extra 'just this once' - the downfall of all reducing diets. (LHJ 1956a:44-45)

This is complemented by 'before and after' photographs of Rosalind Kosloff, illustrating her dramatic weight loss. It is the same woman, but she is changed and ultimately reinvented. The preference for using an actual woman, a role model for the reader, is evident in an advertisement from *Mademoiselle*: 'How Judith Nash Lost 27lbs with Amazing New Appetite Reducing Plan.' (Mlle 1952b:31). Again, two photographs of the same woman with a

different body are given, one so altered that she is difficult to recognize. In the August 1956 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal* an incentive is used to illustrate the miracles of dieting: "'I hated my looks - until I lost 40 pounds", says pretty Connie Calabro, divinely happy bride of two months.' (LHJ 1956b:). Once again, marriage is the ruler by which women's success is calculated. Dieting is shown as a way of changing life through changing the body.

The most dramatic impact of this type of advertising, of this illusion of achieving the perfect body through consumerism, is an advertisement from *Mademoiselle* for swimwear: 'The Figure You Wanted to Buy is in Every Peter Pan Swimsuit.' (Mlle 1963:20-21). The illustration is of a woman removing her swimsuit, the advertisement framing her body so that only her legs and arms can be seen. The swimsuit is at the woman's ankles and it is perfectly moulded in the female form. It is as if the woman's body has been shed, discarded, and the image of ideal femininity is left at her feet as she steps out of it. Femininity is shown to be only a construct, an illusion which is pulled on and off, and it is artificial, moulded plastic.

These advertisements all depict the woman as emerging chrysalis-like; the thin woman out of the fat, and, inadvertently, a natural woman out of her constraints, although the advertisement is aiming for a reverse of this image, suggesting that a perfectly formed woman is transformed from her natural shape. These are all images of creating the woman, of changing the body. A woman is seen as raw material to be shaped, adjusted. An advertisement for McCalls Printed Patterns claims: 'make the clothes that "make" the woman.' (SV 1956c:153). There are two illustrations of the

same woman: in one, her body is a dressmaking pattern, with all the darts and folds; the other, is of the woman wearing a dress. The suggestion is that women create themselves from themselves, they are not really women until they are designed as women.

Plath's awareness of the pressure for reinventing women is evident in her work. The poem 'Face Lift' is on one level concerned with the biographical information of Dido Merwin's face lift. It is partly situated in a hospital environment and so engages with Plath's imaginative reinvention of hospitalization. The poem highlights secrecy and sedation, and so echoes Plath's written experience of hospitals evident in 'Tulips' and 'In Plaster'. These poems share a peculiar imaginative perception that I will discuss later depth. First I wish to look at the way 'Face Lift' treats the notion of female reinvention.

'Face Lift' is a poem of double narration. It begins with an opening speaker but switches the authority of the poem to the visitor who has had the face lift:

You bring me good news from the clinic,
Whipping off your silk scarf, exhibiting the tight white
Mummy-cloths, smiling: I'm all right.
(1988:155)

The narrative is appropriated by the woman who has reinvented herself and her voice authorizes the text. The poem's concern with surface images reflects the connotations of the gaze discussed earlier. The woman's physical change is reliant on the other woman's gaze: the initial speaker's acknowledgement of the woman's face lift is essential to an appreciation of the change.

The knowledge of recreation revolves around the mirror, the need for reflection:

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror -
(1988:156)

A fascination with youth and reinvention is suggested by these lines. The opportunity to create another self echos the images from the women's magazines; the shedding of the body to release a new one:

Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away as easy as paper.
When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I'm twenty,
(1988:156)

The skin peels away magically, echoing the magazines' images of women escaping their fat or old bodies. This escape is towards a reclamation of a former self. Unlike 'In Plaster' it is not a struggle for supremacy between equally divided selves but a rebirth, a reinvention:

Old sock face, sagged on a darning egg.
They've trapped her in some laboratory jar.
Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,
Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair.
Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,
Pink and smooth as a baby.
(1988:156)

The re-emergence of the woman as a new born baby feeds into the popular understanding of how a woman possesses the capacity and desire to reinvent herself on the level of appearance; yet the gaze by which women are evaluated can be seen as the incentive for these reinventions of the body. Plath's poem 'Mirror' expresses the defeated position of women in relation to self image:

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.
(1988:174)

'Face Lift' contains the narcissistic reply to this fear. The first speaker of 'Face Lift', who appears detached, is involved as the other woman who needs to listen and watch; she is a voice from outside the text. Her use of 'exhibiting' signals the emotion with which these operations are undertaken: it is an encouraged need for women to live their life through their appearance. The second speaker becomes a self creating entity, with no need for a mother, able to reproduce herself, and, as the magazines illustrate, this was a desire which became increasingly important.

Mothers

Simultaneous to this pursuit of youth, the eclipsing of age, was a magazines' ethos involving the replacement of the mother by the daughter, and this is reflected in the projected buying choice of the generation, the progression in age and role from *Seventeen*

to *Ladies' Home Journal*. While the mother was encouraged to look younger, there was still a societal need for a continuation of the ideal of marriage and motherhood, partly achieved through establishing ideas of tradition and continuation. The use of the mother as role model incorporates ideas of reflection and duality. The mother and daughter relationship is obviously important, but in this era the constricting of the space between the two roles creates a pressure on the daughter. In a time when women were often hoping to progress from their mother's role of subordination, the women's magazines were often hauling them back. *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Seventeen*, perhaps more than *Mademoiselle* which portrays a certain assured independence, perpetuate the future of women as static and predefined. The daughter has to grow into the role of the mother and the nature of this dialogue between mothers and daughters becomes claustrophobic. The mother's concentration on the daughter may have arisen out of an adherence to the popularized Freudian theories of the 1950s. The mother daughter duality seemed a safe, undamaging option for control, in comparison to the mother and son relationship. The encouraged dependence of the daughter on the mother and the restriction on maintaining the position of child until marriage, is reflected by this presumably attractive prize for the 'Seventeen's Favourite Recipe Contest':

In addition, the winner and her mother (or a chaperone) will win an exciting four-day trip to New York City.
(SV 1955a:35)

The prominence of the mother in the daughter's life appears natural to the magazines. This is most noticeable in *Ladies' Home Journal* which, by including both mothers and daughters, creates an almost stifling duality. The cover illustration of *Ladies' Home Journal* for May 1952 inadvertently illustrates the difficulty of division and the employment of the doll-like woman. The illustration is of a family with the prerequisite father, mother, daughter, son. The mother and the daughter look very alike as they both lean into the illustration to kiss Dad's cheeks. The mother looks almost exactly the same as the daughter: blue eyes, blonde hair, upturned nose. The mother hardly even appears as an older version of the daughter but more as a slightly more refined version, but still enduringly cute, childlike, reflecting the daughter. This is in contrast to the father and son who share no resemblance with each other or the rest of the family. They are anonymous while the tie between the mother and the daughter is cemented.

On the surface, the magazines' portrayal of mothers and daughters is one of support and love. In the *Ladies' Home Journal* world the daughter is a reflection of the mother with the mother central to the relationship. *Seventeen* portrays the inverse position as the daughter role becomes more central and the mother is the positive role model. These two positions are connected by their social acceptability since they remain within the vision of a family; their selves are inseparable and interconnected. In October 1951 *Ladies' Home Journal's* article 'How do you Rate with your Daughter?' illustrates the connections between social conformity and parental control through a feminine perspective:

Fifteen-year-old Joyce McCoy is as popular, likeable and attractive as any teen-ager we know. And the behind-the-scenes heroine who's responsible for the poised, well-mannered Joy is her mother, Nita McCoy. [...] Nita can see that her efforts in her daughter's behalf have been more than rewarded, for Joy is a cheerful, co-operative girl who unconsciously extends to her mother everyday courtesy and respect. (*LHJ* 1951:213)

This supposedly encouraging, connecting article for mothers reading the magazine and for the daughters it is passed on to, reflected by Aurelia and Sylvia Plath's reading relationship, contains an undercurrent of payment and debt. The daughter has to reward the mother's efforts in her grooming. The daughter is seen to belong to the mother who hopes to successfully mold her, to achieve the perfect daughter. This perfection is expressed mainly through social directives: to be cheerful, co-operative, well-mannered. The daughter owes the debt of this predefined femininity, and any attempt to rescript this role can contain feelings of guilt and failure.

The idea of the daughter being created by the mother may be an attempt to avoid competition between their attractiveness. The mother can develop the daughter to safely usurp her position and role while attempting to avoid jealousy and insecurity. Also in this issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, an article on Marlene Dietrich's daughter, Maria Riva, is featured, titled 'I couldn't compete with my Mother'. A revealing paragraph concerns Maria Riva's perception of herself:

Thus, whenever Maria consults her mirror to brush on her lipstick or her mascara, the reflection and the photograph are side by side, inviting comparison. She cannot see her own face without also seeing her mother's. (LHJ 1951:54)

This is the hidden metaphor for the mother and daughter relationships portrayed in the magazines. The presentation does not allow for any separation of image and identity apart from regeneration. *Ladies' Home Journal* presents women who are replaced by daughters who have been shaped and moulded to resemble them. It seems to be in everyone's interests, the mother's, the magazines', and the advertisers', that the female image remains the same. The 1950s ideal of femininity was intended to continue into the next generation: the daughter being forever present in *Ladies' Home Journal* and the mother becoming a pervasive spectre in *Seventeen*. This desire for continuity offers another perspective on the duality of women. The mother and daughter are doubles both physically and aspirationally. The daughter is part of the mother and to an extent her property. Sons do not really feature in the magazines' dialogues, only appearing as other people's eligible sons for the daughters. The replication of the mother is both a lucrative business for the advertisers, who wished to continue and even accelerate the consumer boom, and a restriction on the choices of the daughter. This situation leaves very little space for the daughter to manoeuvre. The moral tone of the magazines makes it clear that the daughter has a responsibility towards the mother: since she is so closely associated with her, her behaviour reflects onto the

mother's reputation. When *Ladies' Home Journal* began to increasingly use real life stories as a way of underhandedly introducing slightly sexual narratives, the daughter's reputation became of paramount importance. In 'What's a mother to do?', from the October 1956 issue, Nan Harrison's dilemma with her teenage daughter, as told to Joan Younger, is a cautionary confession of parental, largely maternal, failure:

'What do you mean?', I said. 'What were you doing upstairs - alone?' Slowly Patty looked at Jack and then at me. 'We were - we were -' She looked at me defiantly. She didn't need to finish. I covered my face with my hands and then told Jack to go. (*LHJ* 1956c:208)

The rhetoric of women's magazines links the mother and daughter together as one person. The presentation of a female sphere that is separate from external experience does acknowledge a woman's world. In this atmosphere, however, it must become claustrophobic and generate ambivalent feelings which the magazines do not acknowledge. Plath's understanding of the mother and daughter relationship, where she herself writes from the daughter's perspective, is largely concentrated in 'Medusa'.

'Medusa' explores the difficulty of separation between a mother and a daughter. This is a situation which can be seen to partly arise from the magazine's presentation of this relationship. Plath's poem writes against this dialogue, is abrasive towards the magazines' consensus, and sounds like the voice that is between the lines of the mother and daughter features. The voice of

'Medusa' expresses the stifled emotions which must arise from mother and daughter duality fashions and the pressure to reflect and comply with the mother's desires:

Did I escape, I wonder?
 My mind winds to you
 Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
 Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.
 (1988:225)

The daughter of 'Medusa' cannot disconnect from the child and mother bond, one which is pulled tighter through the increasing cultural infantilization of women. As Maria Riva Dietrich always sees her mother's face staring out of her own, this daughter can also see no escape from the maternal image. 'Medusa' describes the tensions of this relationship in language of claustrophobia and bitter ambivalence. The final line:

There is nothing between us.
 (1988:226)

illustrates the tensions which arise out of the images of the women's magazines. The double implication of distanced dislike and unavoidable dependency seems to bounce off the rhetoric of the magazines. *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Seventeen* are weighted with images of claustrophobic similarity, with nothing between the images of mothers and daughters. The ambiguity of Plath's final line allows it to reflect the confident images of mother and daughter affiliation while suggesting the stifling nature of this

identity; the confidence of chirpy duality and the feeling of despair and desperation in this unavoidable resemblance. The pivot of the line also reveals a feeling of denial and refusal, the insistence that there is no connection between the two women. 'Medusa' revolves on all these feelings, allowing Plath to enter a dialogue with the popular presentation of mothers and daughters: a position which is accurately reflected in the rhetoric of women's magazines. Plath employs images which are meant to sustain the relationship and subverts them into a much more confused and ambivalent sphere.

III Figuratively Speaking

In considering the perfection of women, the perfected female body and the seamless regeneration of ideal femininity, Plath is seen to be subverting and reinterpreting the accepted images of women, questioning yet complementing a dialogue. Yet Plath also moves the discussion of a self identity realized through society into a more aggressive, confrontational sphere, confronting the sanitization of the female body which controls through suppression and denial. Within the realm of women's magazines, this dialogue can be seen to generate a subsequent fear and concern which is openly exploited by the magazines' advertisers.

Images of women found in the advertisements extensively employ the language and images of duality and choice. *Seventeen*, and increasingly during this period, *Mademoiselle*

and *Ladies' Home Journal*, include advertisements which employ similar notions of duality that the magazines' editorials suggest, but concentrate much more on the concept of 'cleanliness'. The advertisements for Modess sanitary protection illustrate the concern with secrecy and female secrets. They always feature very glamorous but romantic pictures, similar to fashion features, with 'Modess ... because' in large print. *Seventeen* in December 1956 included a Modess advertisement with a caption in small writing at the bottom: 'there is a difference in sanitary napkins ... the gentleness of the only fabric covering that's as soft as a whisper.' (SV 1956e:40). Modess's advertising became so recognizable that they could omit the writing, leaving only the romantic image and the oblique message 'Modess ... because' to sell the product. While this seems like a progression to more modern means of advertising, it also illustrates the secrecy and hesitation surrounding adverts for 'sanitary napkins', further revealed by the simile 'as soft as a whisper' which enforces a feeling of secrecy. In *Mademoiselle*, 'Sunday at the Mintons' is printed next to an advertisement for Tampax:

Don't miss a swim - use Tampax! Frequently women give up swimming on 'those certain days' for no other reason than bathing-suit worries. (Mlle 1953:374)

The typical promotion of Tampax for swimming and the evasive, illusionary language, demonstrates the secrecy which exists even within a publication for women. The language used suggests a secret vocabulary, an exclusive dialogue which is not

stated but understood. The avoidance of language, the rescripting of menstruation either into a dialogue of fantasy and romance, or the practicalities of sport, illustrates an actual fear of expressing and depicting female bodies. It is a veiled and coded discourse.

The antidote to this approach is the very forceful method of presenting implied choices, which rely on the pressure of popularity. In a *Seventeen* feature, readers are reminded that: 'Your habitual use of deodorants, toothbrush and mouth-wash keeps you socially secure.' (SV 1955a:59). The advertisements ruthlessly exploit the connection between personal hygiene and popularity.

A concentration is placed on the fear of smell, of any kind of odour connected with women. As illustrated by the Tampax and Modess advertisements, there is an insistent avoidance of corporeality. *Seventeen's* February 1963 issue includes the advertisement for Kleinert's Stay-Rite Shields. Using the concept of choice there are two photographs. 'Safe?' accompanies a photograph of deodorants and 'Safest' is illustrated by a woman wearing the Stay-Rite Shields. The slogan is '(only a Stay-Rite shield protects you completely.)' (SV 1963:167). A few pages further is an advertisement for Arrid Perstop deodorant with the question: 'Do you pass the Whiff Test?' (SV 1963:173). *Ladies' Home Journal* in July 1952 featured an advertisement for Listerine Antiseptic which combined the elements of popularity and success:

The Weakest Link in the Daisy Chain! -

Some of the girls were leaving college for careers, others for a future of social gaiety, and a great many others to be married. But Julia could look forward to none of these experiences. She had three strikes against her from the start. Socially she was the weakest link in the Daisy Chain ... and she didn't know why. (LHJ 1952d:9)

Advertisers exploited a fear of exclusion and built their campaigns around notions of acceptance by the peer group, an issue partly explored in Plath's short story 'Initiation'. The advertisements reveal a concentration on the suppression of the female body, a denial of its physicality in favour of a sanitized surface presentation. A stress is placed on the virtue of 'cleanliness' and the advertisements betray a fear of body odour, of nature and smells. The desire was for a sanitized, deodorized body; the image of a woman who was not actually human but the essence of femininity with a manufactured fragrance: 'All over ... all day - wrapped in the flower freshness of Cashmere Bouquet.' (LHJ 1955:130).

The concept of equating femininity with the negation of women's corporeality is approached by Plath in several ways. On a narrative level, part of Esther Greenwood's complex rebellion is expressed through a rejection of hygiene. Esther first discards all the chic, smart clothes she has accumulated in New York, giving them up to the wind from her apartment window. It can be imagined that all the discreetly fashionable clothes found in *Mademoiselle* are gifted to 'the dark heart of New York.' (Plath 1980:117).

Esther pursues this rejection of the magazines' femininity by abandoning any attention to hygiene. When she visits Dr Gordon she is still wearing the outfit she left New York in:

I was still wearing Betsy's white blouse and dirndl skirt. They drooped a bit now, as I hadn't washed them in my three weeks at home. The sweaty cotton gave off a sour but friendly smell. I hadn't washed my hair for three weeks, either. (1980:134)

Esther rejects the magazine ideal which she has been absorbed in. Her denial of all the hygienic virtues is a rejection and removal from a society which she can no longer comprehend and no longer wishes to be a part of. Her actions are a direct reversal of the magazine's construction of femininity. *The Bell Jar*, however, still works within the magazine's understanding and boundaries. Esther's lack of interest in her appearance, her apathy towards her looks, is interpreted as a sign of mental illness. She says:

It seemed silly to wash one day when I would only have to wash again the next. It made me tired just to think of it. I wanted to do everything once and for all and be through with it. (1980:135)

The equation between lack of interest in maintaining the magazine ideal and the onset of an emotional breakdown supports

the connection between a woman's appearance and her mental position. The relationship between Esther and the reader allows for Esther's reflections on mundane repetition to seem reasonable; she is able to keep the reader contained within her perception of reality. The assertion of dirt and smell, disconnecting Esther from the person she was in New York, simultaneously suggests a positive action, a decision which reverses the codes she has learned, and is understood as a symbol of her dangerous removal from society. While *The Bell Jar* remains within a realistic framework, Esther's refusal to wash is connected to her mental instability: a woman's lack of interest in her appearance signals an emotional fragility. In 'Three Women', society's barometer of a woman's mental health is how quickly and efficiently she recovers her perfect appearance. When Second Voice prepares to leave hospital after a miscarriage, it is the resurrection of her feminine social self that supposedly signals her health:

Here is my lipstick.

I draw on the old red mouth.

The red mouth I put by with my identity

A day ago, two days, three days ago.

(1988:183)

The resumption of her magazine perfected appearance signals the return of her identity. The cementing of the image of herself through cosmetics is reassuring to others, although it is sadly evident that Second Voice's emotions do not correspond to the face she has applied. But Plath delicately balances the situation;

she recognizes this is often more than a patriarchal construction of women's assumed identity, and is ambiguous towards the benefits and desires of assimilation. In some of Plath's poetry, however, when her writing moves outside of narrative and is concerned with reinventing texts rather than retelling, the connection between women and defilement becomes increasingly explicit in its criticism.

Plath's poetry contains images of women who are fertile in their revulsion, their physical presence and odour. 'Lady Lazarus', previously included in a discussion of women's magazines through the poem's exhibitionism of the image, is also relevant to a rejection of the magazines' ideal images. The presentation of this decaying woman is focused on her physicality:

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
(1988:244)

Within this context and awareness, the intense corporeality of 'Lady Lazarus' is a rejection of the equating of cleanliness and sanitization with a woman's attainment of power, necessitating a rejection and a mockery of the power of physical containment.

The magazines offer the power to attract, to focus others and capture them through a mist of deodorant and perfume. Lady Lazarus's overwhelming empowerment is achieved through a construction of a kind of mythology, and this rescripting of women within a more aggressive environment necessitates a rejection and a mockery of the power of cleanliness and physical containment. The fantasy constructions of the magazines, the concentration on image and the focusing of the reader/viewer's gaze links the portrayal of the magazine women to Plath's equally fantastical woman.

Plath further asserts the female corporeality which the magazines disguise and avoid, through the extensive presence of bloody images connected to menstruation in her work. As illustrated by the Modess and Tampax advertisements, the magazines' approach was a mixture of disguise and false assertion. In the early poem 'Maenad', part of the 'Poem for a Birthday' sequence, Plath adopts a slightly hesitant, obscure expression:

This month is fit for little.
 The dead ripen in the grapeleaves.
 A red tongue is among us.
 Mother, keep out of my barnyard,
 I am becoming another.
 (1988:133)

Plath's later work, however, develops a more explicit discourse and the 'blood flood' of her work is often antagonistic towards the prevailing secrecy and suppression. In 'The Moon and the Yew

'Tree' Plath desires a denial of the sterile woman, favouring the moon and menstruation:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
(1988:173)

The virginity of Mary is rejected for an alliance with the moon, her unloosing of bats and owls a physical release. The images of slaughter in 'Totem' are connected to the female as the animals are described in language associated with pregnancy:

In the bowl the hare is aborted,
Its baby head out of the way, embalmed in spice,

Flayed of fur and humanity.
Let us eat it like Plato's afterbirth,

Let us eat it like Christ.
(1988:264)

The severity of these images, the unsparingness of the language is a kind of aggressive feminine discourse; words which are often silenced are used without hesitation.

The world is blood-hot and personal

Dawn says, with its blood-flush.
(1988:264)

Plath's work asserts the female body, concentrates on the physical, in an era which often tried to deny a specifically female physicality. Plath understands female barrenness in negative terms, and seems, at times, almost to revel in culturally suppressed aspects of female physicality and fertility. The 'blood-flush' of 'Totem' expresses not only the opposite of the untouched, sterile virgin through expressions of fertility, but also implies a sexual exclusivity; the resistance of motherhood to maintain the purely sexual being. Plath talks about women's bodies as physical realities, articulating the corporeality of women which suppressed in popular representations. Even though women's magazines were addressing women, they still spoke in coded discourse. Plath's work seems to revel in the feminine secrets withheld by the magazines.

'The Munich Mannequins' uses blood imagery as a reverse of the poem's prevalent sterility:

The blood flood is the flood of love,
(1988:263)

This sensuality is, however, suppressed by artificial, sterile images of women:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb
(1988:262)

acknowledges the previously acceptable and subsequently tendentious use of 'barren'. Yet within the range of feelings possible at the time, Rich expresses the mixed responses of scorn and jealousy directed towards the barren woman, emotions often reflected in Plath's depictions of sealed, almost perfected, women.

Plath's poems overspread their smell and mess; there are often images of distaste and odour in her work concerning the image of women. In 'Lesbos', it is relevant to observe Plath's manipulation of language, her use of the vocabulary which the magazines deny and euphemize: 'stink', 'crap' and 'puke' (1988:228). Plath moves the issue of cleanliness in the magazines from the appearance of the young, unattached and thus predatory woman, to a concentration on the married woman and the appearance of her home and children which reflect onto her. This is illustrated in the magazines by the prevalence of advertisements for headache relief pills. Trevor Millum considers this connection:

Headaches prevent, amongst other things, the woman attending to visiting parents, dealing with children and doing the ironing. They are the deadliest enemy of the wife and mother in the carrying out of her duty. [...] Illness is seen on the one hand as something which necessitates the care and attention of others and which therefore reinforces the wife and mother role and is not a real threat (serious illness is not considered), and on the other hand something which prevents the wife and mother from carrying out her role and which *is* a serious threat. (1975:175)

The one illness which is allowed to women within their duty filled lives is a headache and a plethora of cures exist which use the advertising rhetoric of before and after. The relief is to enable women to continue their household lives efficiently, including keeping a clean, well-organised home. *Ladies' Home Journal*, with its status as the married woman's read, is extensive in the concentration on housekeeping. As with the younger magazines and personal hygiene, the advertisements of *Ladies' Home Journal* reflects its editorial. An advertisement from January 1958 advises: 'When you can't take time out ... take Bufferin. Bufferin acts twice as fast as aspirin to relieve pain.' (*LHJ* 1958:109). The accompanying photograph is of a woman looking as if she is in pain and stressed, dutifully using a hand mixer while two children argue and fight in the background. The illness of the mother disrupts the harmony of the home. The connection between the health and control of the mother and the house is drawn in the images of disorder and dirt in 'Lesbos':

You have stuck her kittens outside your window
 In a sort of cement well
 Where they crap and puke and cry and she can't hear.

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
 I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
 The smog of cooking, the smog of hell.
 (1988:228)

'Lesbos' reacts against the sanitization of the magazines on the level of language. It voices feelings of frustration and anger

excluded from the magazines' rhetoric of cleanliness employed to determine a woman's duty. The speaker's use of sleeping pills is an attempt to be able to reiterate this routine day after day, to maintain these responsibilities. 'Lesbos' is an important poem in illustrating how Plath maintains a dialogue with the magazines and how she exposes, subverts and moves beyond their messages: yet also widens the discussion outside the concerns of representation and image into an exploration of the fuller social position of women, an intense dialogue concerning the rejection of the feminine ideal. Although women's magazines are an emblem of the essential nature of women's limitations, a more complex issue exists which demands a recourse to a more socially intensive discussion. This is an area which Plath writes about extensively: the connection in women's lives between illness and duty, within a domestic realm.

The Domestic State: Personal and Political

I Hoover: An Appliance and a Presence

Plath's work concerning mothers and wives reveals images and references relating to the political and domestic rhetoric of her era, as a consideration of the political atmosphere and pressures of the period will indicate. To attempt draw an analogy between the failures of American housewives and the supposed 'internal threat' of the Cold War, may seem improbable until the insidious effect of political propaganda is outlined. Political rhetoric concerning 'the enemy within' tended to concentrate on a fearsome image, to generate notions of a monstrous, powerful force, containing the contradiction of almost superhuman awfulness. Hubert Humphrey believed that he was explaining the strength of the communist threat towards internal security when he stated to colleagues in the Senate:

I do not believe there is a Senator or a Member of the House of Representatives who could even catch a Communist, or would know how. This is a job that must be done by experts. (Keller 1989:33)

Justification for the supremacy of the FBI was based on the belief that the communists were both powerful and organised. Communists were represented as constituting a political movement necessarily expert at secrecy to maintain hidden identities. This version of the communists credited them with

great intelligence and power, hidden by a necessary veneer of ordinariness. William W Keller describes the American reaction to these fears: 'a conception of communism as a monolithic force bent on the destruction of the government of the United States and of Western society generally.' (1989:29). The language revolving around force and destruction is, within this context, a decidedly masculine representation. In a time of strong syntactic division, women existed, as the women's magazines demonstrate, within an active discourse of service, submission and silence.

Although the communist threat was rhetorically interpreted as masculine, actively aggressive and of a reluctantly acknowledged intelligence, there was also a subtext of fear which was obsessed with subtleties and gossip which moved within a much more feminine sphere. By targeting Hollywood the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee fueled an atmosphere of suspicion. The connection between the fantasy industry and an increasingly complex delusion of internal treason reflects a national blurring of boundaries. The creation of fantasy became a focus for suspicion of subversion. Suspicion was focused on the cinema industry since it was recognized as an influence upon society. The Hollywood inquiry became a spectacle, increasingly cinematic in its publicity. In a study from 1952, Robert K Carr describes this process:

Its hearings have been brought in graphic detail to millions of newspaper readers and movie-goers. Its reports have been analyzed by scores of newspaper columnists and radio commentators for these same millions. In the end it is fair to say that the process by which the committee's labors and

findings have been reported to the American people by the press, magazine, radio and motion picture has become an integral and essential part of the investigation itself.

(1952:365)

There was a spate of public interest stories, mainly directed at women, providing the entertainment to accompany the politics. A certain atmosphere of shock was combined with the salacious; the familiarity of the arena shifted a subject which tended to concentrate on masculine imagery and language into a more entertaining, gossip-fueled arena, an area which is ultimately interpreted as feminine. Carr's description of the report in *The Washington Post* illustrates the entertainment value of the hearings:

The Post headline was brief: BOBBY SOXERS AND MOTHERS: WOMEN CHEER ROBERT TAYLOR AS HE URGES BAN ON REDS. Its story reported that 'Robert Taylor, famed screen lover, yesterday asked congress to outlaw the Communist Party while hundreds of women wildly cheered him on.' (1952:373)

This fervent and explosive description transfers a political hearing into encouraged jingoism. The role of the public, especially the devoted females seen to be supporting male aggression, is central to cementing the fear of communism which develops, rhetorically, into a fear of deviance. The attitude towards the Hollywood investigation can be seen as a combination of desire and repulsion, a fear of seduction through the fantasy. The confusion arising from the creators of fantasy being involved in a further fantasy;

political treason being recognized as 'a story'; interpreted as a human interest narrative because of the familiarity with Hollywood; making this investigation appear female centered. Connecting suspicion of communist sympathies with a familiar, household industry enabled a public understanding of suspicion and its potential power. It also sanctioned an investigative outlook, as uncertainty and ambiguity became more suspect, while the definitions of loyalty became more dogmatic.

To discuss these issues within a domestic sphere, an area which the rhetoric of the Hollywood investigation leads towards, a specific approach towards the situation is revealed which exists within the dilemma of relationships: a domestic approach towards the situation seems to personalize and moralize. 'If You Ask Me' was a letters page in *Ladies' Home Journal*, with the replies provided by Eleanor Roosevelt. In January 1949, a reader's letter reflects a female centering of the Cold War dialogue:

I have found out that a man and woman who are my friends are active communists. They have a store. Knowing their sympathies, I have stopped patronizing them. However, the rest of the neighbourhood continue to shop there, knowing they are communists. Am I doing wrong mixing business with politics? (LHJ 1949:23)

This letter is inscriptive of a domestic interpretation of the fear of internal treason. The reader uses the rhetoric of investigation and discovery: 'I have found out'. She has cast herself as investigator, questioner, the confused inquisitor who has discovered communists on her doorstep. That these people are

also friends seems to intensify the element of secrecy; people whose lives you should be familiar with, friends, that have been uncovered as communists, producing a confusion of loyalty; national or neighbourly. The subject of spying is troubled as this housewife spies on the suspected spies: although in this situation, it would seem that there is no need for suspicion as the store owners' politics appear to be common knowledge. It is the rhetoric and context which encourages an understanding of this reader's dilemma into a consideration of secrecy. A patriotic instinct leads her to boycott the store. She is, however, faced with a moral conundrum as she finds herself alone in her protest, and thus alienated from her community, the position she wishes to place the communist store owners in. It is also interesting to note the slightly elevated use of business rhetoric, elevating the often menial tasks of the housewife.

Eleanor Roosevelt's reply would appear to be a liberal response:

Communists have a right to earn a living in the United States as long as we permit them to be here. We have an obligation to allow people to think and peacefully communicate their thoughts to others as long as they do not attempt to overthrow the Government by force. For that reason the fact that people who run stores and gain a livelihood believe in certain theories which we do not believe in is no reason, from my point of view, for not associating with them. It may, however, become disagreeable to have contacts with them because you feel you are helping them to promote something which you do

not believe. In that case, you will naturally not continue your contact. That will be for personal reasons and not because of their political views only. (*LHJ* 1949:23)

Roosevelt's statement that opposing political beliefs within a society do not justify animosity and alienation, is a theory which would seem to arise out of a belief in American equality, and could extend to questions of religion and race. This is, however, a tenuous conclusion within an atmosphere of Cold War debate. Roosevelt's opening statement, concerning the rights of communists within the United States, immediately grants them alien status; identifying them as a precarious nationality, and perhaps even contains a subtext of racism. To return to the jingoistic ravings of Robert Taylor, Eleanor Roosevelt's reply seems almost a disguised version of his statement:

If I had my way about it [communists] would all be sent back to Russia or some other unpleasant place [loud applause] and never allowed back in this country.
(*Carr* 1952:373)

In Roosevelt's reply, the meaning of 'to be here' is problematic in an expression of equality. There is a clear reluctance to connect communists and Americans and so communists either have a kind of unspecified nationality or their 'Americanness' may be negated at any time. The concessionary nature of 'obligation', reveals a certain reluctance in adhering to American ideology. These statements, which claim to suggest equality and fairness, harbour feelings of suspicion founded on the evaluative basis of 'un-

American'. This is further qualified by the allowance which the reader is granted, also illustrating the concentrated feminization of the context.

Roosevelt moves the reader's question from a political into a personal context, to permit and justify her desired action. Although Roosevelt admits that political motives are influencing the decision, the focus is placed on 'personal reasons', which are presented as a legitimate justification for boycotting the store. This is precarious political grounding. It moves political reasoning into a personal approach: it familiarizes and localizes the situation in a way similar to the Hollywood investigation; resulting in an unsteady correlation between ordinariness and extraordinariness. Rationality is increasingly absent, replaced by instinct and suspicion founded on dubious guidelines. While Eleanor Roosevelt is recognized as a liberal in American politics, this example does illustrate the pervasive mood of Cold War America. In light of the previous discussion, the connection between relationships and politics can be seen as particularly feminine.

The combination of political issues with personalities and familiarity, allowed the stigma and suspicion of communism to expand into everyday lives. This atmosphere was clarified by the conviction and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for conspiring to commit espionage in wartime; an event which signified a concomitant politicization of domesticity.

Discussions of this trial in modern history are conventionally concerned with reinvestigating and questioning the outcome of the trial. Alvin H Goldstein's *The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*, a book arising from a documentary of the same name, concerns itself with investigating the justice of the trial. It also,

though somewhat inadvertently, points towards an increasing domesticization of the fear surrounding internal treason. Julius Rosenberg was arrested under the claim that he was another link in 'Soviet espionage apparatus'. The reaction of Julius Rosenberg towards his arrest is described as: 'Rosenberg terms the charge as fantastic. Something like kids hear on television.' (Goldstein 1975).

After the arrest of Julius, Ethel, perhaps misguidedly, invited the press into her home in an attempt to present a familial and familiar image. She is photographed drying dishes in a rather basic kitchen, her flowered print sundress and carefully coiffured hair attempting to convey an image of respectable domesticity: the typical housewife struggling out of a national depression and war; there is no suggestion of accepted poverty or eccentricity. Carl Marzani, while a section leader in the American Communist Party was assigned Ethel as a volunteer secretary. He remembers her as 'a cheerful, lovely, housewife type.' Ethel Rosenberg was arrested on August 11, 1950, the day following the arrest of her husband, Julius. She is photographed, flanked by two police officers, looking extremely ordinary: heeled shoes, flowered hat and matching handbag, displaying enough housewifely homeliness to qualify her as a *Ladies' Home Journal* devotee.

Bob Considine, who was an eyewitness to the execution of the Rosenbergs, describes the confusion he feels when trying to understand of their lives:

These people could have saved themselves up to the - uh - last few minutes of their lives. Those curious lives that had started out in the poverty of the Lower East Side here in

New York and which over time had shown great promise. He was a graduate electrical engineer. She had hoped to be an opera singer. Had a good voice. Became a stenographer and they were childhood sweethearts. Everything to live for. A couple of children, residence in this great country and with all of its opportunities. They died differently, gave off different sounds, different grotesque manners. (Goldstein 1975)

Considine's description of an attainable 'American Dream' for the Rosenbergs emphasizes their ordinariness and, more importantly, their Americanness. The presentation of their American aspirations: educated, and stable with the elusive quality of 'promise'; the detail of Ethel's childish ambition and her eventual contented female skill as a stenographer; the sentimentality of 'childhood sweethearts'; reveal signifiers of the America of this era. Considine's emphasis on opportunity and family reveals the incomprehension towards the purposeful dissolution of American opportunity. The Rosenbergs are interpreted into the American values of the individual, offering no real analysis of the possible decisions which arise out of an early life of poverty. The political affiliations of the Rosenbergs are not given any justification or consideration. Their lives are evaluated as desirably American; and in that sense, ordinarily respectable. They comply to a pattern of American life being favourably replicated, found in television and magazines. This is a surface view of a complex situation, but it is important to recognize that this was the received opinion of the Rosenbergs; any attention to

their political sympathies or affiliations would seem a relatively minor consideration to the emerging nuclear family.

During the trial, Ethel Rosenberg swears the testimony of her brother, David Greenglass, and sister-in-law Ruth, to be false. Her interpretation of their testimony is significant: 'She reveals that the Greenglasses were jealous of them and angry about money they had lost in business with Julius.' (Goldstein 1975). This shifts the focus from political intrigue to familial dispute, domesticating and familiarizing the situation. The details of the conspiracy further domesticated the trial. David Greenglass and Harry Gold claimed that their recognition signal had been provided by Julius Rosenberg. It was a side panel of a box of Jell-O, cut into two pieces that would fit together: the symbol of the American housewife's kitchen had been implicated in a conspiracy trial.

This trial, and particularly Ethel Rosenberg, domesticated America's understanding of Cold War treason. The Rosenbergs imaginistically reflected American family life. Although it is very important to recognize their Jewishness, introducing within American propaganda the idea of the alien, there was also a focus on their Americanness, one which the Rosenbergs themselves seemed to comply with in their lives. A very moving photograph of their children, Michael and Robert, shows them studying a newspaper with the headline 'SPIES GET 1 MORE DAY'. The juxtaposition between the headline's alienation and detachment, and Robert's all-American Dodgers t-shirt encapsulates America's tensions. The national familiarity of the Rosenbergs enforced a belief in the enemy within, as treason was moved into the realm of the family.

An additional strain is evident in the representation of Ethel Rosenberg. While on trial, she strove to present an image of the ordinary, respectable American housewife; her impact necessarily became demonized, in order to separate these two aspects of her person. Vincent Lebonite, who was the jury foreman, illustrates the necessary demonization of the housewife:

There might have been just one individual who in his mind could not vote unanimously with us at the time. This individual could not conceive of a woman being put to death. I do distinctly recall mentioning that possibly Ethel Rosenberg's actions someday might be responsible for your death, the death of your children, your family, and even her children for that matter. And I think when the man was able to equate what I had said with what he had felt, I think this might have been a determining factor in him changing his mind. (Goldstein 1975)

This statement requires a demonization of the mother and the destruction of motherlove; it attempts to credit Ethel Rosenberg with a superhuman power and cruelty. Because she was a mother Ethel's actions attracted more condemnation than her husband's. The nation felt a need to define her as evil in order to understand the apparent impossibility of the situation, and she became a demonized American housewife. Bob Considine's memory of the execution further clarifies a nation's fear of her strength:

[...] he died quickly. [...] She died a lot harder. When it appeared that she had received enough electricity to kill an

ordinary person and had received the exact amount that had killed her husband, the doctors went over and placed the stethoscope to her and looked at each other rather dumbfounded and seemed surprised that she was not dead. And she was given more electricity which started again the kind of ghastly plume of smoke that rose from her head. After two more little jolts, Ethel Rosenberg was dead. (Goldstein 1975)

The idea that enough electricity to kill an 'ordinary person' could not kill Ethel Rosenberg illustrates her mythical status. Even in relation to her own husband, she is presented as stronger, stranger, more superhuman. Incomprehension generates these myths of female evil encapsulated in an image of the woman who would not die. The combination of ordinariness and secretiveness fueled the increasing tensions around internal treason and national security. While there were protests against the execution in 1953, they centered around a humanist approach. Faith in the American justice system ensured the belief that the Rosenbergs were guilty, that ordinary people in your neighbourhood were capable of concealing secret lives.

An insight into this situation is provided by Goldstein when he evaluates the jury that was chosen for the trial:

They were all remarkably similar in background, education, employment, and what they read, and what they had learned. [...] Carefully excluded were all Jews in a city with one-third Jewish population, all liberals, in a city known for its liberalism, all readers of any but the most conservative

publications, in a city with a wide and varied press. They were a jury of the Rosenbergs' neighbours, but not their peers. (1975)

The distinction between neighbours and peers reveals a feature of American society at the time. In comparison to peers, neighbours introduces a specific social relationship, representing familiarity, but also hostility and suspicion. The Rosenbergs were typical neighbours, although they were also subtly recognized outsiders: this conflict seeming to contain the hidden dangers in American community life.

Without debating the outcome of the trial and the political debate which still continues, it is important to consider Nat Hentoff's opinion on the verdict, which he situates within a historical context:

They were also being tried to reassure a citizenry made paranoid by a Cold War that their government would 'protect' them against spies and subversives whose seeming ubiquitousness was essential to maintain the Holy Scourgers in power. [...] How vivid, how palpable a proof of the Communist menace were those two corpses.
(Goldstein 1975)

Hentoff regards the trial as a conspiracy and a frame-up against the Rosenbergs, situating the trial within an assumed government plan to retain the faith of the nation. Without becoming involved in a debate concerning the justice of the case, it could be conceded that the atmosphere described by Hentoff is

accurate. The American citizen's knowledge of, and involvement in, the Cold War, especially on the East Coast, led to feelings of vigilance and a persistent awareness of the enemy within.

The combination of feelings of paranoia and fear with a domesticization of the threat can be seen as causing disjunctions within communities. The familiarization of the Cold War; the reduction of political issues to personal debates; the concentration on the facade of ordinariness; the fear and threat which grew out of a family and a mother; contribute to a heightened atmosphere of suspicion. Plath's domestically situated poems reflect this atmosphere, circling around the society and rules that emerge from a female centered culture, one which enclosed the *Ladies' Home Journal* image of Ethel Rosenberg.

This cultural context is pertinent to the images and rhetoric of Plath's writing. As Eleanor Roosevelt's presence in *Ladies' Home Journal* illustrates, a Cold War apprehension was present in women's popular culture, where political debate is combined with the perfection of the female image. A social interpretation of the housewife is relevant to a further consideration of the overbearing female image. The consideration of context fully illustrates the social tensions placed on women in this era, and Plath's awareness and engagement with a contextual and cultural interpretation of a female consciousness.

The glorification of the housewife bears an uneasy, hypocritical relationship to the actual facts of woman's life today, and is responsible for the otherwise inexplicable distress of modern American women.

(*LHJ* 1963:24)

This statement from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is part of an extract published in *Ladies' Home Journal*. Following the publication of Friedan's book in January 1963, the article, 'Have American Housewives traded brains for brooms?', appeared in their February issue. *The Feminine Mystique* attempts to expose the fantasies which surround the role of housewife in order to reveal the central inadequacies of this position. The boldness of Friedan's polemic is slightly modified by the editorial voice of *Ladies' Home Journal*, almost as if they are trying to deny culpability:

Mrs Friedan, a wife and mother of three, insists she is a writer who keeps house, rather than a housekeeper who writes. She believes a modern American woman who devotes herself solely to house and children will have trouble finding her identity. The *Journal* welcomes comments from readers. (LHJ 1963:24)

Ladies' Home Journal's subtle composite of 'Mrs Friedan', seems to suggest a tiring woman. The choice of 'insists' sounds almost like a kindly tolerance; they have to amuse Friedan and her semantic puzzles. The statement that Friedan 'believes' in her argument introduces the suggestion of dogmatism in her ideas. Obviously, Friedan's attack on the limitations of the American housewife is an offensive geared towards the magazine and its readers. The destruction of the fantasy housewife, who has been created and maintained partly through the woman's magazine, is a reaction against the wider accepted view of women. Although the

article tactfully omits any direct attack, in *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan does directly criticize the industry:

Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house. In all the talk of femininity and woman's role, one forgets that the real business of America is business. (1963:206)

It could be argued that the women's magazines are structured by their advertisements. The editorial content reflects and complements the world created by advertising, sharing similar issues and concerns: the creation of women as consumers benefiting both the editorial and the advertising. The growth of the commercially-orientated, home-directed wife and mother is a recognizable result of the redefinition of gender roles following the Second World War. Adrienne Rich describes her almost inevitable immersion in these expectations: 'I became a mother in the family-centered, consumer-orientated, Freudian-American world of the 1950s.' (1981:5). Friedan employs women's magazines as a touchstone for this encompassing image of the American woman; a usage similar to the way in which Plath's work interacts with the images and rhetoric of the women's magazine. Women's magazines summarize how women were perceived during this reign of the housewife, and Plath's work articulately and implicitly deconstructs and reinterprets this image, both through a reflection of the magazine and women's position. By considering the relationship between context and Plath's writing it is necessary to expand outwith the confines of

specific women's culture, although that will also be relevant, to consider the centrality of Plath's era within her imagination. This is an issue which cannot be contained by the boundaries of the magazines' world, but they offer a spring board for further developing a discussion of how Plath confronts this perfect magazine woman when she steps out of the glossy pages to do battle with reality.

Friedan's deconstruction of the American housewife is included in *Ladies' Home Journal* the month that Plath killed herself in London with the ultimate symbol of women's domesticity: a gas cooker. A certain irony bonds all these elements together, and it is often suggested that Plath just missed the social and political understanding of the limitations on her own life. I would suggest, however, that Plath's work when contextualized within the domestic sphere, is open to a social and political understanding that moves outwith the confines of the personal.

A discussion of Plath's voice as a wife and mother, is, however, bound by the age limitation and social boundary she remains within. This has led to a biographical reading of the domestic poems, contextualizing the voice of the poem within Plath's own experiences. These interpretations differ from what is often interpreted as the mythic structures of her writing; although both are read as self-reflexive, poems within a domestic situation are not granted the same degree of abstract or imaginative thought. The assumed heavy presence of the biographical, combined with the seemingly inconsequential domestic surroundings, conventionally limits an understanding of these poems. By closely reading the poems, however, it is clear that this is a mistaken

limitation of self when read in relation to the social and domestic context of Plath's era.

Plath's poetry encapsulates the strain between overtly domestic, personal situations and a submerged political and social resonance; the submergence of the social situation from which the domestic environment of Plath's writing emerges. The political atmosphere of this era is largely generated by the effects of the terminology and imagery of the Cold War. Although history books discussing this era rightly recognize the discrediting, within governmental politics, of the fevered paranoia generated by McCarthyism, a consideration of the effect on the population is neglected. A brief history lesson would highlight the early political events of the 1950s as a dangerous time which settled into a stable, if locked, Cold War. The fear which American propaganda generated over events such as East Europe and China falling to Communism and the Russians matching American achievements in atomic development as quickly as 9 February 1950, were generally regarded as forgotten as America began to fully progress into the feel-good fifties. I would suggest, however, that the repercussions of this time reverberated further than the conclusion of the McCarthy witchhunts in 1954. During the early years of panic, the America administration accounted for these 'threats' as the effects of internal treason, concentrating on the inward protection of America, perhaps ironically described as the Domestic State. As an analogy to the *Ladies' Home Journal* symbolism of the picket fence, the adamant desire to contain the nation in security became entangled with feelings of suppression and enclosure.

America's misguided obsession with internal treason led them to begin a search for the 'enemy within', the photofit traitor created by J. Edgar Hoover. Keller, in a discussion of Hoover's relationship and position within a 'Domestic Intelligence State', describes how: 'By 1950, Hoover's name was a household word, associated with everything that was right about America [...].' (1989:24). In this twin era of commercialism and treason, Hoover became a permanent household installation, both as an appliance and a presence. After nurturing the overwhelming belief among America's population that the increasing challenge to their country's supremacy in the Cold War of the 1950s was due to internal treason, it was not so easy for an impressionable generation to forget the notion of the pervasive Red presence as it was for politicians. This atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust survived in America throughout the decade and beyond. Stephen E Ambrose describes the era as a time when: 'everyone in America was checking on everyone else for possible Communist leanings.' (1976:186).

It is important to consider the political rhetoric of the time and the language which was used to define the problem. In an FBI press release from 1950 J. Edgar Hoover is quoted as stating:

The forces which are most anxious to weaken our internal security are not always easy to identify. Communists have been trained in deceit and secretly work towards the day when they hope to replace our American way of life with a Communist dictatorship. [...] While they as individuals are difficult to identify, the Communist Party line is clear. Its first concern is the advancement of Soviet Russia and the

godless Communist cause. It is important to learn to know the enemies of the American way of life. (Keller 1989:50)

Stress is placed on the notions of secrecy and disguise. This can be interpreted as partly echoing into ideas of duality and self-masking, the notion of protecting the real self while presenting a false image. When viewed within a feminist perspective, this interpretation relates to specific representations of women in this era, encapsulated in the images from women's magazines. The previously discussed duality of Plath's poetry, concerning the constant shifting of the boundaries of the self, relates to problems surrounding the definition of women's self image. The division of self within this particular social time and country, however, is relevant to both sexes in relation to the pressures of nation and government. There was a feeling of uncertainty within Americans, and a feeling of suspicion towards other Americans.

Plath's poetry reflects this era of paranoia within the domestic context while remaining within a specific American context, often expressing East Coast aspirations, a situation which provokes a discussion of national recognition in Plath's writing. The poems that I shall be largely concerned with in this discussion are written while Plath was resident in England, living in London and Devon. While Plath's life was being played out within an English context, her work, when situated within a domestic context, often remains wrapped in a sense of America. The frequent concentration on commercialism appears mainly an American concern. A revealing incidence is an interpretation by Stevenson of Dido Merwin's problematic account of her relationship with Plath:

They [Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes] splurged on a huge new bed, a refrigerator, and a cooking stove, rather to Dido Merwin's surprise. Dido, who with her husband was able to furnish temporary tables, chairs, curtains, and rugs from their attic in St George's Terrace, remembers recommending secondhand shops where a bed frame and kitchen equipment could have been bought very cheaply. [...] But Sylvia, who had had her fill of the 'sagging net' at 18 Rugby Street, wanted at least her bed and her kitchen to meet American standards of comfort and convenience. (1989:181)

This conflict illustrates the strong division which existed between the American sensibility that Plath retained, and the more bohemian, academic approach of the English society she entered into. This is not an attempt to introduce an understanding influenced by biography to Plath's poetry but to illustrate the essentially American sensibility of much of her writing when concentrates on domestic situations. Plath's continued reading of American women's magazines also indicates a continued awareness of the American housewife. When viewed within a feminist understanding of the conflicts of the housewife, Plath's treatment of the domestic situation is not restricted to America. If, however, concentrated on a historical and social understanding, the atmosphere and tone indicate a specific American context.

Poems such as 'The Other', 'The Detective', and 'A Secret' contain a rhetoric of secrecy and suspicion which is supported by popular conceptions:

The secret is stamped on you,
Faint, undulant watermark.

Will it show in the black detector?
(1988:219)

These expressions of paranoia and suspicion become the defining atmosphere of Plath's domestically contextualized writing. The woman's position in 'The Tour', of the housewife being investigated while spied on by a hostile aunt, feeds into notions of vigilance. People were placed under suspicion and uncertainty, especially within these closed, female spheres, as the understanding of the enemy within became more graphic and conceivable. Published in the wake of the Cold War, *Witch Hunt: The Revival of Heresy* extensively employs the imagery of witch-hunting as a parable for Cold War fever. Carey McWilliams quotes from studies by Christina Hole to illustrate the similarity of fear and prejudice:

There was, of course, a witches' international and from one end of Europe to the other, witches were regarded as a fifth column, the secret enemies that might be found anywhere, even in a man's own house. (1950:267)

It is interesting that this is introduced as a parable for America's reaction to the Cold War as it again feminizes and domesticates the threat. It also clarifies the presence of a claustrophobic fear and distrust. This atmosphere was obviously suppressed within the white, comfortable communities within which Plath contextualizes her domestic poetry, and diverted within the similar English Devon community, but Plath often exploits the tensions that arises from these situations.

Plath's poem 'The Tour' illustrates how, within the presentation of a domestic situation, there is embedded an exploration of the wider social issues of the era. 'The Tour' relates a niece's description of a visit by a 'maiden aunt' to her home. The life of the niece is explained in the poem; within this era it can be deduced that she is a young married housewife in a new house, which is about to be subjected to a familial investigation. The niece's language is bursting with an almost hysterical enthusiasm, a voice which is attempting to disguise the tension with a combination of the saccharine and the acidic. This poem presents a distorted reality; it appears to take place in a world of modern Grimm fairy tales, as if irrelevant to an actual life; but the issue is not so decisive. While the speaker relates the episode with a skewed vision, the actual event is within a realistic context, and it is one which is pertinent to an understanding of contextualizing within the domestic sphere. The niece systematically relates to the aunt all the disasters of her new home:

It went up in smoke.

And that's why I have no hair, auntie, that's why I choke

[...]

It'll be *lemon* tea for me,
 Lemon tea and earwig biscuits - creepy-creepy
 (1988:238)

The musicality and gleeful rhyming of the persona is reminiscent of techniques found in Stevie Smith's poetry. A noticeable employment of the childish interpretations of life, found in Smith's poetry, conceal or contain a harsher reality. The trauma of experience is disguised and deflected by a voice that is reluctant to fully comprehend the experience. Plath's work can be seen as deploying similar deceptive tactics to Stevie Smith.

So I thought I would try
 To burn their house down to make them die,
 (Smith 1984:230)

These lines from Smith's 'Telly-me-Do' display a similar jocular, dismissive tone but it is one which only invites eerie laughter. A subtext of disintegration is continuous with an underlying fear of aggression, through Smith's almost childish reversal of dying: the focus is on the external action of burning the house rather than the wish for death. Although Plath can be seen as borrowing Smith's tone, her employment of the technique of deflection is for a different effect. The persona of 'The Tour' is locked in her hysterical perception, reinterpreting reality and creating fantasies from her environment. This poem contains and exploits conflicting perspectives. The voice of the struggling housewife,

who perceives her household as increasingly dysfunctional, contrasts with the silence of the aunt, who is also a presence to the reader. It is through the aunt's position as observer that the poem draws itself towards a realistic context. The poem's continuous one sided conversation does imply the watchful figure of the aunt. The concentration on the persona, and her hysterical attempt at deflection, reflects the deceptive nature of the poem; it must be contextualized and diverted from an adherence to the narrative presented by the housewife, in order to situate the persona within a historical understanding.

'The Tour' is descriptive of a particular era and its aspirations. The concentration is placed on household possessions, which would perhaps be expected in a newlywed's home, but there is also an intense awareness of rivalry and materialism:

Not a patch on *your* place, I guess, with the Javanese
Geese and the monkey trees.

[...]

That's my frost box, no cat,
Though it *looks* like a cat, with its fluffy stuff, pure white.

[...]

Here's a spot I thought you'd love -
Morning Glory Pool!

The blue's a jewel.

It boils for forty hours at a stretch.

(1988:237-38)

The housewife's recognition of a consumer battle is significant. This competition is sardonically recognized by the persona, but she is trapped within its evaluation. There is also a very specific historical signification within the terminology: the fleeting fashionableness of 'Javanese Geese' and 'monkey trees'; the perky description 'frost box'; and the glorification of the washer, which seems to sing in advertising blurbs. Plath's employment of consumer language reflects the meaning of these women's lives. They converse in the language of selling through the ideas of admiration and desire, the theory of advertising. This extends the discussion of the relationship between Plath's work and the manipulations of women's magazines. The world of women's magazines is implicated in to an understanding of this relationship with advertising, going some way towards explaining the surreal quality of the persona's descriptions. 'The Tour's concentration on household tasks, reflects the increasing promotion of consumerism which generates pride in the home; a comparison even apparent in the title, reflecting the degree of show and exhibitionism that was directed on to the woman's home. The poem reflects an era of high spending, the language indicating a time of the 1950s, which effectively expanded in to the early 1960s, a decade which Plath remains within. The concentration on consumerism in this poem affects the persona through the presentation of her subjective boundary of hysteria and paranoia. Materialism is the focus through which her collapse is filtered.

The narrative of 'The Tour' is framed within the investigative nature of social relationships, which relate to the poem's social context. The actions of the 'maiden aunt' reveal the poem's subtext of doubt and fear, allowing the persona's images of paranoia to emerge. The aunt does not speak but she is described as rooting about the house, almost as though she is investigating the niece,

O I shouldn't put my finger in *that*
Auntie, it might bite!

[...]

O I shouldn't dip my hankie in, it *hurts*!
(1988:237-38)

Within the context of the accepted narrative, the aunt's visit is a friendly social call, but through the lens of the persona, more sinister intentions appear to be underlying. The aunt's visit is interpreted as her own private detection work, her mission being to snoop on other members of her family. The observational detachment of the aunt stresses the persona's sense of being watched and tested, although she has progressed beyond the stage of entertaining the situation. It becomes apparent that the implications of this situation suggest more than the problem of harmless nosiness. 'The Tour' presents the image of a housewife whose distorted view of reality is filtered through a domestic situation, revealing an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia in

relation to visitors and neighbours, reflecting a situation of isolation and enclosure.

These feelings are absorbed into Plath's writing, combining the elements of a personal situation with a cultural context. The young housewife of 'The Tour' is obviously under an amount of strain: the pressure of a house visitor, the test of her femininity by the aunt, produce a hysterical voice, which desperately tries to divert and disguise. The housewife's paranoid optimism, her attempt to reduce the effect of her household disasters, reveals her to be presenting a front, a self which is constantly slipping:

And *this*

Is where I kept the furnace,
Each coal a hot cross-stitch - a *lovely* light!
It simply exploded one night,
It went up in smoke.
And that's why I have no hair, auntie, that's why I choke

Off and on, as if I just had to retch.

Coal gas is ghastly stuff.

(1988:238)

This housewife attempts to present a perfect home, in contrast to the one that is showing through the cracks. Household rhetoric, the homely sentimentality represented by the 'hot cross-stitch' coal; is combined with incomprehensible disasters, the strangeness and hostility of her own house towards her. Central to this combination is the presence of the maiden aunt. A silent visitor, an inspector of this situation, she judges and evaluates the

housewife. In her study *Madwives: Schizophrenic Women in the 1950s*, Carol Warren describes a situation which relates to the relationships in 'The Tour':

The fifties ex-patient was monitored by her closest relative or spouse for signs of trouble recurrence and was liable to have her actions interpreted as symptoms of mental illness. (1987:34)

The young housewife's attempt at normality is aimed at the aunt, whose silence can be registered as confusion and suspicion towards this home. The young housewife is not fulfilling the standards of housekeeping; still dressed in 'slippers and housedress' at visiting time, she is not maintaining the standards of domesticity as perceived by 1950s America. Although the poem is obviously a distorted view of reality filtered through the housewife, there are no expressions of understanding or sympathy in the poem, only hostility and withdrawal. The maiden aunt represents a respectable figure of authority in domestic matters. The dynamics of this situation, of the contrast between the two women's perceptions, echos contemporaneous ideas of suspicion and incomprehension. The young housewife appears abnormal, different, even verbally violent, and in a society adoring towards the household and hostile to failure, it is conceivable that she is incomprehensible to the aunt. The presumption of a person being weird or different in a suburban community, feeds into Hoover's rhetoric of secrecy and uncertainty. People who are 'difficult to identify', incapable of explanation, were cause for suspicion.

The housewife in 'The Tour' may seem an ineffective example to illustrate this argument: her suburban lifestyle and small time home disasters do not seem to warrant anything but sympathy. However, there was a great deal of shame attached to women's marital and domestic failure. A huge pressure for perfection, and a reluctance to acknowledge difficulty was being fed to women through the diet of women's magazines. The domestic situation did not allow for any deviation from the norm. The suppressed aggression found in the voice of 'The Tour' does not articulate an attack on this impossible perfectibility, but rather contains the frustration and exhaustion of defeat and isolation. The strained voice is not trying to break from convention but is expressing the futility of trying to maintain a veneer of respectability:

I am bitter? I'm averse?

Here's your specs, dear, here's your purse.

(1988:238)

In the same way that Hoover describes communism as an enemy to the American way of life, this hopeless, even inadvertently dangerous, housewife is behaving antithetical to an understanding of the American woman's way of life. Placed within a domestic context, the rhetoric of Hoover corresponds with the dangers of the bad housewife.

As 'The Tour' revolves around tensions of investigation and assumption, of gossip and suspicion, 'Eavesdropper' portrays similar fears. A claustrophobic relationship with the neighbour is described, a relationship which involves watching and observing:

Eyes like mice

Flicking over my property,
 Levering letter flaps,
 (1988:261)

The imagery of 'mice' illustrates the strain between the domestic world and a recognizable social context. Mice are simultaneously small, insignificant pets living within the realm of the family and loathed vermin which invade private space. The 'flicking' and 'levering' behaviour suggests a representation of the latter, and a resented invasion of personal space. The connecting claustrophobia of these two poems contain feelings of entrapment. The grotesque elements of 'Eavesdropper' project directly onto the neighbour, again creating a kind of Grimm brothers echo of macabre fantasy figures:

Do not think I don't notice your curtain -
 Midnight, four o'clock,
 Lit (you are reading),
 Tarting with the drafts that pass,
 Little whore tongue,
 Chenille beckoner,
 Beckoning my words in -
 The zoo yowl, the mad soft
 Mirror talk you love to catch me at.

How you jumped when I jumped on *you*!

[...]

I called.
 You crawled out,
 A weather figure, boggling,
 Beige troll, the low
 Church smile
 Spreading itself, like butter.
 (1988:260-61)

The poem is contextualized by its language: the use of chenille, a fabric which dates the situation; the twitching curtains illustrating the polite observation. Plath's work is concerned with the feeling of being under surveillance, an emotion which can be seen as a national mood of unease. The delusions experienced by the women described in Carol Warren's study illustrate the interplay between personal and political rhetoric and understanding:

These women's delusions revolved around their social place: they were someone else, they were being persecuted by neighbours or by the CIA. (1987:74)

The persona of 'Eavesdropper' feels that she is being watched and studied under a veil of neighbourly concern:

Your brother will trim my hedges!
 They darken your house,
 (1988:260)

The tensions between the neighbourly relations, and a fear of control are revealed through the speaker's bitterness. The removal of the hedges' shadow will allow a better view of the house, easier to watch the neighbours watching you. It is significant that the speaker becomes involved in this game of surveillance: she notices the twitching curtains, notes what the eavesdropper is doing. The rhetoric is concerned with capture and observation: the neighbour loves 'to catch', and the persona delights in how the neighbour 'jumped when I jumped on *you*!' This language and imagery suggests a form of domestic spying; a community which is encouraged by a national mood. In reevaluating the cases of women committed in this era, Warren quotes the women's husbands, who often did not recognize their wives' problems:

Mr Thorne: 'the neighbors would just kind of keep it to themselves and I guess they figured I knew what was going on - I didn't.' Mr Oren: 'I didn't notice too much - but the neighbors did.' (1987:72)

These comments illustrate the combined pressures of community observation and inaction. The neighbours watched, listened and monitored, but did not become involved. They adopt the roles of voyeur and eavesdropper and this is clarified by the contextualization of the poem.

There do seem to be more sinister connotations to the situation, revealed by the speaker's bitterness and resentment. As the young housewife of 'The Tour' may be offering a filter of

her reality, so may this housewife persona. In *Madwives*, Warren describes what is almost a rescripting of the women's lives, the pressure to move their understanding of the problem from a social to a psychological interpretation:

During the course of hospitalization, a number of the women learned to apply this psychological theory of causes rooted in their original families, blaming their mothers (and sometimes fathers) for their emotional troubles. But in the first few interviews the focus was not on parents. Rather - and especially among those women with paranoid delusions - it was on neighbors. (1987:85-86)

The women's concentration was originally focused on their immediate community, but was encouraged into pursuing a more psychologically orientated interpretation focused on childhood experience. There appears to be a disjunction between the appropriate method with which to approach these women and the treatment they received. Warren suggests that the women were taught to direct their problems on to themselves, disregarding any explanations which fed into an understanding of their social role as housewives. The interpretation the women first gave of their lives revolved around their neighbourhood; the communication of their illness was an expression of disjuncture in their community. While these women were all diagnosed as schizophrenic, although this extreme diagnosis is now questioned, an understanding of their own interpretation of their illness and its manifestations is neglected. Warren thus suggests that their status as housewives,

within this specific era, contributed to both their illness and their diagnosis.

The concentration that these women placed on their neighbours, and the emotions and distortions which arise, are reflected in 'Eavesdropper'. The poem indicates towards a suburban, enclosed, domestic situation: the intense focus on the neighbourhood arising from their prevailing presence. By presenting her view of suburban life, the persona disguises her reciprocated obsession, the suspicion which she internalizes. But the poem moves outwith the enclosed, gossipy tensions expressed by a closed, repressed female community. The correspondence between Plath's imagery and rhetoric with a dialogue of political enclosure, reveals a cause and effect. The frictions seem to arise out of a social tension, one concerned with watching over your shoulder, observing everyone's behaviour. As the Rosenbergs and the *Ladies' Home Journal* store owners illustrate, you could never really know who was living next door. It is interesting to observe that in 'Eavesdropper', Plath uses the American spelling for 'neighbor', which contributes towards situating the poem within a specific context. The domesticization and movement of the threat into the sphere of the family contextualizes the feelings of paranoia. It is not that Plath is directly dissecting the atmosphere arising from the Cold War but that it is an intertextual element to her construction of the domestic scene.

Even when Plath's work moves into a more clearly defined English environment, the feelings of repression are still prevalent. 'The Bee Meeting' begins with tensions of secrecy, fear and exposure:

Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are
 the villagers -
 The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
 In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
 And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
 (1988:211)

To the speaker, this feels like a kind of conspiracy: she is placed outside the group, singled out for scrutiny. The representatives from the villagers offer a critique of the social and sexual institutions which control women, forcing issues of ownership and power. While the element of control arises out of a feminist understanding of this group, it also suggests the possibility of a social understanding of these emotions. It is not only the idea of being controlled and contained but the immediate response to the situation, the feeling of being excluded and suspected. It is a classic conspiracy theory; to be contained by unquestioned and unchallenged members of society. Although it can be understood as a purely patriarchal conspiracy, interpreted as Plath's exposé of the confines society places on a woman's life, it is constructed within a framework of another relevance, one which flirts with the imagery and rhetoric of Cold War containment.

It is a domestic environment, with a hidden scale of judgement:

It is the surgeon my neighbors are waiting for,
 This apparition in a green helmet,
 Shining gloves and white suit.

Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?
(1988:211)

These representatives of village life are people who figure prominently in the life of the isolated, internalized woman. They are her contacts with a world outside of family, and it is significant it is figures of village life, an almost quaintly English village scene, who conceal feelings of hostility. This relates to ideas of the woman as outsider, and echoes into Cold War rhetoric. Although this is an English environment, she is still excluded and regarded as a stranger. This is a poem concerned with disguise and confusion; the transformation of 'neighbors', again an American spelling, into a dialogue of suspicion, where the persona is placed outside the circle. This is a ritualized, organized occasion: the imagery of the 'circle of hives' adding to the idea of sacrifice, is combined with imagery of the domestic. It is a fantasy situation grounded within a very real environment. Feelings of paranoia and uncertainty are pervasive; shaping the atmosphere which this situation is built upon.

II A Discourse on Mothering

Tensions arising from this political and domestic atmosphere are exemplified by the restrictive cultural interpretation of the role of wife and mother. As an example of the idealized role Plath dissects in her writing, I will briefly return to the imagery of the woman's magazine, the central signifier of women in this context.

Within these reassuring pages, the young mother is consistently presented as blissfully content in her roles as housewife and carer. The magazine fiction of this era reflects the ethos of the woman who is satisfied and fulfilled by her home and family. The short story 'A Perfectly Horrible Week' appeared in the July 1960 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*. It encapsulates the ideal lifestyle of their readership; a family that lives in the suburbs, with a husband who works in the city and a wife who fulfils the role of mother in the home. In this era, before the reinterpretations of feminism, there is no recognition of a narrative which was to become ironized. Peter, the husband, walking home from the station, admires his picketfence:

He was proud of the fence, it made a safe yard for the children and added immeasurably to the appearance of the property. (LHJ 1960:57)

A reinterpretation of this self pride suggests the emptiness in this adoration of property and boundaries, and an understanding that the symbolism of the picketfence does not only present a barrier for children to the outside world, but also for the isolated wife. But in this context, these issues are in a distant future. There is no criticism of the situation from within the text. To continue the story, the wife has damaged the husband's car and this is to account for her frayed nerves and her 'perfectly horrible week':

'That's just the trouble,' she sobbed. 'Everything - everything - over and over. Your poor little car. I'm so stupid.' [...]

'Now sit down and read the paper or something, and, if you'll let me, I'll cook supper.'

'Darling.' She hugged him. 'I wouldn't think of it. You're tired, and anyhow, you wouldn't want to outrage a good sirloin steak, would you?' (LHJ 1960:81)

Any despair that the wife may feel over the monotony of her life is passed over for her excessive guilt about her husband's car. She is restored to obedience and faithfulness merely by a husband's offer to cook dinner, and so overjoyed at this kind proposal, that she insists on doing it herself as a reward. The fact that this is a wife who faithfully and, mostly, indefatigably fulfils her role is emphasized by the husband's vague request that the wife rests and 'read the paper or something'. He has no concept of the wife involved in any kind of self-involved leisure that does not reinforce her role as wife and mother. These observations were not evident to the reader of the 1950s and early 1960s. The level of irony which can be introduced to the interpretation is a feminist rereading of the narrative. The magazines adhere with a level of almost laughable seriousness to the ethos of the devoted housewife. Any chinks in this housewife's emotional and physical armour is consistently devalued in relation to the husband and the patriarchal framework.

In the January 1952 issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, a lone voice departs from this overwhelmingly reiterated optimism and

confidence. A reader's letter expresses emotions which sit uncomfortably with the magazine's self image:

I am so sick and tired of the life I live that sometimes I just can't see any future. My husband feels the same way. [...] But we aren't very happy with the boy we have. [...] My husband says we might as well give up everything and just sit home and wait until the child grows up, marries and leaves home. (*LHJ* 1952a:5)

This despairing letter is signed by 'name withheld', but there seems to be confusion as to the cause of this embarrassment. It would seem from the content of the letter that an attempt at anonymity would arise from a recognition of her and her husband's inability to be loving parents, but any shame seems to arise more from being connected with the son; it is the child's fault. This is not trouble with a teenager but with a toddler. The woman disassociates herself from the child: 'we aren't very happy with the boy we have' sounds like displeasure at a product, as if the child has been bought and they wish to return it. The family problems are interpreted through consumer language. The husband is a controlling presence, combined with a level of detachment: his advice echoes like a reply to the wife's worries. There is no reply from the magazine, no advice, no attempt to define the problem. This woman's glaringly contradictory voice, in a magazine that totally advocates motherlove, with absolutely no allowance for despair at the role, questions why this letter was ever included. It appears that it could only be included as a warning: in a magazine thick with popular theorizing of Freud and

Dr. Spock, the scenario of this letter would be horrifying. *Ladies' Home Journal* acknowledges problems with teenagers, but does not disturb their perfected image of childhood innocence. In the context of the magazine, the letter does not incite sympathy.

The misery of 'name withheld' seems to suggest a subtext beyond the label of bad mother. The eerily detached language suggests that the rejection of the child is connected to other feelings of depression. The situation which can be read between the lines of this episode seems to be a distant father and husband, and a young mother who talks in such defeated language, that clearly the focus of interest has to shift from the child to a recognition of her disguised depression. The husband sounds as if he's humouring her, and the child seems to be a casualty of her situation. It is the burden of being 'mother' and the strain of being 'wife' to a insensitive husband that has turned this woman's life into a struggle against an infant. The story which lies underneath this letter seems to be one of a worn out, tired and defeated woman who is failing in the role of *Ladies' Home Journal* housewife.

This dark situation can be interpreted as a silent voice or silenced voice. The woman's redefinition of her life leads to the centre of tension being transferred on to the son, rather than examining her domestic situation. Plath's poetry can be read in correspondence to this woman's despair, as her work is heavily contextualized within a domestic sphere. While this has been interpreted as a result of her personal situation and, more incisively, as part of a feminist understanding of the lives contained within the poetry, I wish to expand this theme in

Plath's work into a contextual situation, suggesting a historical and political impact in Plath's writing about motherhood.

A consideration of how Plath interprets and manipulates the domestic situation in her writing arises from the women's magazines in that they encapsulate a perfected domination of the domestic situation. It is the world in which their readers are encouraged to flourish, are simultaneously persuaded of the value and joy of its limitations, and the boundless extent of their responsibilities and advantages. This perfect housewife is prevalent in Plath's writing, fulfilling many roles for the author to manipulate. She is the perfect double previously discussed in relation to the images of the magazines, she is a role model for Plath to succumb to and to destroy; this humble housewife of home baking and the PTA is often the demon of Plath's writing, who is attractive and repulsive, defeating and defeated. These many dimensions of the girl who grows through *Seventeen*, marries through *Mademoiselle* and 'housewives' through *Ladies' Home Journal*, is an introduction to the wider issues that Plath constructs in her writing within an exploration of the domestic sphere.

The interpretation of the domestic sphere in women's popular culture covers the position of the woman as she develops within the family situation from daughter to wife to mother. As previously discussed: in considering specifically the images and rhetoric of the magazines, it is clear how Plath reinterprets the vital mother and daughter relationship; by placing herself as a daughter, the claustrophobia and the tension felt towards the mother can be interpreted as the undercurrent of the way this relationship is understood by society. This reading of the

maternal bind communicates directly the inevitability of inheritance, of the daughter becoming the mother. It is this question of Plath becoming the mother, adopting this role, which presents perhaps the most direct and final point of departure from the fantasy of the magazine. Plath has to reevaluate the antagonism and ambivalence of the daughter role as she becomes what was previously attacked. These two roles, however, are reconcilable. Plath's poetry does not adopt the role of the mother she has attacked but is a reverse of this, since it does not allow her to become powerful or controlling. It is the helplessness of the mother role that can fuel the anger towards her myth of the controlling mother.

The complexities that Plath engages in her presentation of the young wife and mother move beyond a discussion of what the magazine fantasy offers. This dilemma expands in the same way that the whole discussion of the women's magazine does, in that the emblems and images of this medium reflect as a whole the popular understanding of women, and so Plath's rewritings, reinventions and rejections of this ethos are a dialogue extending to encapsulate the popular image. Also, more centrally in Plath's work, the construction of the self as young wife and mother suggests connections which extend into a more complex debate once the reality of the magazine fantasy has been revealed. Within the context of Plath's writing, the central figure of the mother feeds into the iconography of Ethel Rosenberg, interacting with a cultural debate on motherhood. The demonization of the female figure produced an added strain on the stresses of motherhood.

The prevailing feelings of isolation and suspicion shaping the women's reactions seem to arise from the concentration of images and pressures directly related to the popular perception of women and mothers. The narrow spaces which these mothers and housewives are contained within, the modern houses and hedged gardens, limit their lives. Through a consideration of the atmosphere of repression found in Plath's poetry, I have already shown the work corresponds with Cold War rhetoric. I wish now to focus more sharply on the specific domestic advice that contributed to feelings of isolation and exclusion, considering how this also corresponded with the ideals of the Cold War. The emotions expressed in Plath's poetry relate to a specific interpretation of mothering, often defined by its historical positioning. The domesticization of the Cold War images, centering around the figure of Ethel Rosenberg, led to women being vulnerable to suspicion and distrust. The homebound nature of women's lives, the internal spheres of small, but disparate, communities, isolated them as from a political society, while defining an emblematic mother figure. They became isolated by society's narrow and prescriptive definition of the mother. In a Cold War atmosphere, the modern American idealization of the mother began to encompass more clearly a dialogue of national responsibility.

It is relevant to consider the foundation to the modern commercial ideal of motherhood. In 1914 motherhood became a national concern as the United States Congress passed a unanimous resolution to establish Mother's Day. Part of the resolution read:

Whereas the service rendered the United States by the American mother is the greatest source of the country's strength and inspiration [...]. Whereas the American mother is doing so much for the home, for moral spirits and religion, hence so much for good government and humanity [...]. Therefore, be it resolved that the second Sunday in May will be celebrated as Mother's Day. (Margolis 1984:47)

The legitimization of the mother's role by Congress which subsequently evolved into a wholesale marketing holiday reflects on the commercial era which Plath was engaging with. The American mother which developed was a combination of Congress's idealization, and the pressure of consumption: contained within the contradictions of childcare, reflected in popular culture by Dr. Benjamin Spock.

To cast Dr. Spock into this role is an intentional limitation of his opinions and reactions during the 1950s and early 1960s. Dr. Spock is a central figure of this era, largely through his manual *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, and his regular advice column in *Ladies' Home Journal*. These publications represent a thoroughly American guide to raising children. Dr. Spock did eventually revise his central tenet, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. In 1974 he omitted the judgmental discussion 'The Working Mother', and in the British edition from 1979, he explains the need for a revised copy:

The main reason for this 3rd revision (4th edition) of *Baby and Child Care* is to eliminate the sexist biases of the sort that help to create and perpetuate discrimination against

girls and women. [...] Now I recognize that the father's responsibility is as great as the mother's. (1979:17)

The earlier editions, published at the height of his fame, did not express these more liberal views, and were in Dr. Spock's own words, constructed with 'sexist biases'. The original role enforcement of the earlier editions, and Spock's decision to revise the book and reevaluate the position of women reveals the changes achieved by American radicalism, a movement which Spock himself became involved in through the Vietnam protests. The gender divisions enforced in the original copies, which advocated the carer role as exclusively female, obviously binds the book to its era, accepting and perpetuating the subordination of women. Although Spock's theories are inextricably linked to a discussion of the position of women, in considering the American consciousness, an awareness of the connection to Cold War debate is central. The acceptance and embracement of Dr. Spock's theories in the postwar era reflects on to the political atmosphere. While discussing the rhetorical ties between Spock's prescriptions and a Cold War debate, he must be temporarily frozen in a time prior to his political involvement and vocalization. In *The Trial of Dr. Spock*, which focuses on his opposition to the Vietnam war drafting, Jessica Mitford summarizes Spock's position up until the mid-1960s:

Totally immersed in his professional work during the whole long postwar, cold war, period, he virtually stood aside from politics - when he thought of world affairs at all, he uncritically accepted official American doctrine. (1969:11)

Spock's acceptance and faith in the American system and the judgement of politicians did not entirely exclude him from political debate. As a Democrat supporter, Dr. Spock actively campaigned for John F. Kennedy in 1960. The securing of his stature and influence was perceived as a major coup of the election campaign:

He [Dr. Spock] appeared on television with Jacqueline Kennedy, who murmured rapturously, 'Dr. Spock is for my husband, and my husband is for Dr. Spock!' (Some newspapers treated his participation as a clever Kennedy gimmick to garner the 'mother's vote'.) (Mitford 1969:11)

This television appearance reflects much of the myth surrounding Dr. Spock. His position as child-care expert is presented as part of a political campaign; the political objectives and values he supports are reflected in his child-care advice. A visual link is established between his child care methods and Kennedy policy. Dr. Spock of child care is intrinsic to the Cold War creation of American identity. Jacqueline Kennedy's cryptic slogan reveals the true placing of the mother within this combination of Cold War policy and child care. 'Dr. Spock is for my husband' is the political electioneering, but 'my husband is for Dr. Spock' moves the debate into an area of social control and standards. It is the male approval of Dr. Spock, the authorities' political confirmation of Spock that is vocalized. Dr. Spock's ideas are abstractly supported by Cold War muscle. Jacqueline Kennedy is present as the mouth piece, portraying the image of the young American mother, but it

is her husband's endorsement of Spock that is central. It is the concurrent masculine approval which reveals one of the central problems of Spock's methods. The mother is replaced, devalued, by the male approval of her mothering. Jacqueline Kennedy epitomizes the modern American mother of her time: while she is visible to the American consciousness, she only voices her husband's opinions; she desires his sanction as much as Dr. Spock's, reflecting a masculine control of mothering. Spock's ideas were politically supported, allowing an understanding of his methods to be interpreted through the Cold War atmosphere.

Motherhood is increasingly defined and clarified by the experts, who appear to be supported and endorsed by the State through the influence of Dr. Spock. *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* revolves around a rhetoric and ethos of mothering, which, endorsed by Congress's Mother's Day in 1914, resurfaces and clarifies itself in relation to a Cold War society:

[...] useful, well-adjusted citizens are the most valuable possessions a country has, and good mother care during early childhood is the surest way to produce them.

(Spock 1945:460)

This advice from Dr. Spock focuses on the patriotic importance of mothering, and directly feeds into the rhetoric of Cold War suspicion and normality. The prevailing fear of the 'enemy within' results in a concentration on rearing true Americans. This advice, with the concentration on 'useful, well-adjusted citizens,' contains the possibility of its opposite, which in a time of Cold War rhetoric, was perceived as a danger. It is this projection into the

future, Spock's discussion of future adults, which adapts his advice into a social debate. This is not just child care advice for mothers but for America; promoting the development of patriotic citizens. The use of 'citizens' is important, moving the debate from the child to the adult, one which is contributive to the state. The fear of mental illness is supported through the euphemism of 'well-adjusted', signalling its presence in Cold War fear. The focus on 'good mother care' concentrates the responsibility for producing ideal American citizens on to the mother. While this advice is from a 'nurture' premise, the semantics of this advice leads an understanding of mothering into a Cold War discussion.

Dr. Spock's advice concentrates on producing ideal citizens, a pressure which directs towards the sense of enclosure felt by Americans, and the encouraged suspicion and fear of its own citizens. The emphasis on baby care seems part of an attempt to limit the opportunity for subversion. American women came under national pressure to be perfect mothers, as the figure of Dr. Spock was enforced on the campaign trail as well as the advice columns, mothers were imbued with the responsibility of producing 'useful, well-adjusted citizens'. Through the concept of 'sound citizen building' (MacPherson 1991:43), the responsibility to protect the country from an inner threat of communism appeared to belong to the family and ultimately the mother. Mary McCarthy's novel *The Group* follows the lives of six women during the 1930s in America, yet corresponds with issues prevalent in *The Bell Jar*. The reflections of Priss on the birth of her child further illuminate the national centrality of the mother:

And these new babies who ate and slept regularly, on a schedule, like little clocks, as Miss Swenson said, were going to grow up into a new kind of man, who perhaps (it did not do to be too optimistic) would no longer want to make wars and grab property. (McCarthy 1989:229)

Although the regulation of babies is overturned by Dr. Spock, there remains a concentration on the fantasy of the good citizen. What Priss understands as an effortless evolution into 'a new kind of man' reveals the heart of American ideology: individual improvement and responsibility for the benefit of a nation. McCarthy's adopts an ironic and mocking tone towards this ethos, betraying an outsider's position. This extract does, however, reveal the role of mothers to be one of national responsibility, which in a more clarified Cold War position, became a political issue. Through a rhetorical alignment, housewives seemed to be disproportionately in charge of security and civil defence. Political fear enhanced a concentration on individualism, reflected by the very specific and limited presentation of the Rosenbergs, and mothers were portrayed as one of the central defences in maintaining a true America. The role of the mother was weighted with responsibility, and the demonization of Ethel Rosenberg added to the fear of bad mothering.

Plath's writing suggests a recognition of the pressure this placed on the mother, and although her poetry does not categorically state this discussion, the women she creates represent the living consequences of this ideology. The responsibility to improve and protect American values and its citizens, which appeared to belong to the family and ultimately

the mother, is illustrated in Plath's poetry and prose by the abundance of on the edge housewives and mothers. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther subconsciously recognizes the potential fate of the mother. When Esther is hospitalized, in a 'special ward' in the euphemistic terms of her mother, the woman in the bed next to her explains why she is there:

'I'm here on account of my French-Canadian mother-in-law.' She giggled again. 'My husband knows I can't stand her, and still he said she could come and visit us, and when she came, my tongue stuck out of my head, I couldn't stop it. They ran me into Emergency and then they put me up here,' she lowered her voice, 'along with the nuts.' (1980:187)

This woman's giggled tale of rebellion is in contrast to Esther's sullen depression. Esther overhears the doctors speaking to the woman:

'And how are you feeling today, Mrs ...' somebody said, and the name sounded long and full of I's, like Mrs Tomolillo. Mrs Tomolillo giggled. 'Oh, I'm fine, doctor. I'm just fine.' (1980:188)

Although Esther does not consciously make the connection in the text, she has encountered another Mrs Tomolillo earlier in the narrative. When Buddy Willard takes Esther to view a childbirth, the doctor keeps demanding:

'Push down, Mrs Tomolillo, push down, that's a good girl,
push down,' (1980:68)

Mark George Schemanske, in his Ph. D. thesis *A Hex on the Cradle and Death in the Pot: A Kristevan Analysis of the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, draws these conclusions about the significance of Mrs Tomolillo:

Perhaps most revealing is the fact that one of the most unstable patients in Dr. Gordon's private hospital is named Mrs Tomolillo. She is described as 'a little mother'. Maternal control and psychological control amount to the same thing. Just as maternal exploitation could be seen in terms of economic exploitation, so it can also be seen in terms of psychological exploitation. (1992:199)

These observations, focusing on the way in which women are assessed within an economic value system, are central to the novel. Also, the positioning of women within the hospital system generates structures which reflect varying degrees of exploitation. Schemanske, however, neglects to consider Esther's input into the situation. Esther is unsure about the name she hears but in the text the character becomes Mrs Tomolillo, the name of the woman that Esther watched giving birth. It is not necessarily the same woman, it only sounds like Mrs Tomolillo to Esther. Mrs Tomolillo is a composite woman: at the birth Esther only heard the name, she could not see the woman; in the hospital bed, Esther can see the woman but this time cannot hear the name. The woman is never allowed to be whole at the same time; her identity is

halved. It is only Esther's efforts that result in a whole woman, but it is possible that this unity is an illusion. Esther constructs this woman in a way similar to that in which she constructs all the characters. While Esther can be trusted to present her reality, she is revealed here to be subconsciously constructing a narrative.

Although this link may be due more to the conclusions that Esther draws affecting how she views society than Plath's narrative structure, the text obviously suggests some link between these two incidents. They reinforce an undercurrent of images suggesting that the options and roles available to women often do not satisfy them. Although it is unlikely that Plath would be aware of statistics for women receiving psychiatric treatment, it is relevant to remember that, behind the often sassy voice of Esther, there are two mature women. The voice of Plath herself is heard in various places. Critics customarily recognize Esther as disguised autobiography, but fail to consider that Plath, as a married mother of two children, may be writing herself into the novel positions other than Esther's. Esther is mostly surrounded by married women in the psychiatric hospitals. Also, an older Esther tells part of the story:

I realized we kept piling up these presents because it was as good as free advertising for the firms involved, but I couldn't be cynical. [...] I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sun-glasses case for the baby to play with. (1980:3-4)

This opening comment reveals Esther to be reflecting on the events of 1953 from the position of a different life, one with a

baby. Yet as Esther tells her story this voice of reflection disappears, and the Esther who knows what it is like to live in this era, not the Esther who remembers it, authorizes her experiences. This early voice is a crack in the narrative, especially the claim that 'I couldn't be cynical'. Although experience of the domestic environment does not affect Esther, it is present in the novel through the suppressed presentation of other characters.

Esther is outside the spheres of mothering, she experiences it only as a daughter and a critic. She seems to see mothering as a trick, as a blank state of mind which women are fooled into accepting. As Esther returns to the suburbs, she watches a neighbour in the street:

A woman not five feet tall, with a grotesque, protruding stomach, was wheeling an old black baby carriage down the street. Two or three small children of various sizes, all pale, with smudgy faces and bare smudgy knees, wobbled along in the shadow of her skirts.

A serene, almost religious smile lit up the woman's face. Her head tilted happily back, like a sparrow egg perched on a duck egg, she smiled into the sun.

I knew the woman well.

It was Dodo Conway. [...]

Dodo interested me in spite of myself. [...]

I watched Dodo wheel the youngest Conway up and down. She seemed to be doing it for my benefit.

Children made me sick.

(1980:122-23)

Dodo is one of the many mothers who appear in *The Bell Jar*, not excluding Esther's own future. The novel contains the presence of an older Esther, who shadows Esther's opinions of other mothers. Esther is consistently scornful of mothering, is sardonic in her descriptions of Dodo, yet admits that she is curiously drawn, as if Dodo's situation both attracts and repels. Esther seems to be suppressing a dangerous jealousy, suspecting Dodo of exhibiting the baby, parading her status as a mother. It is unclear whether it is a maternal desire, or a desire for the position that Esther feels; to be a mother would provide her life with a structure, a purpose. But at this point, children make Esther sick, a revulsion from the family and from this unending simplicity. The semantics of Dodo suggests two fates of mothering. In a novel full of doubling, Dodo echos Doreen, the southern belle who also worked at *Ladies' Day*. It is women's fate to be caught in reproducing: Doreen must eventually hyphenate into Dodo. Yet there is also a sense of extinction in her name, suggesting an end to the never ending mothering of Dodo. Esther perceives motherhood as a blank, as if the childbirth anaesthetic never wears off.

Sylvia Plath's poems which are rooted in the domestic environment reflect the pressure of perfected mothering within the home. There are expressions of bitterness; of children as malevolent and difficult, of child care as a struggle. There are young women who appear as observers of mothering in Plath's writing who do not connect with the pleasure of mothering, only the strain. 'The Babysitters' seems to share the voice and emotions of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*.

'The Babysitters' shares Esther's feelings towards mothering. A babysitter talks about someone else's children, connecting the language of domesticity with childcare:

But I didn't know how to cook, and babies depressed me.
Nights, I wrote in my diary spitefully, my fingers red
With triangular scorch marks from ironing tiny ruchings and
puffed sleeves.

(1988:174)

Depression is induced by babies: depression born out of a combination of fear and resignation. Anxiety about adequacy in filling the role of mother is coupled with uncertainty about whether to fill the role at all. In Plath's historical context, mothering is fulfillment. The babysitter expresses her rage and frustration through the language of the domestic. There is something particularly vicious in the description of the 'triangular scorch marks' which seem to predict Plath's later description of 'little hooks', which are continually catching on the mother. Plath emotionalizes the inanimate, a clear expression of pain is conveyed by the seemingly innocent 'tiny ruchings and puffed sleeves'. These fussy symbols of childhood are transformed into punishment; a Grimm fairy tale quality is recognized in the endless ironing of these awkward little garments. Since it is the work of a babysitter, it is mostly concerned with the children, and it is a relationship which demoralizes the woman. This attitude is vastly different from the poetry where children are loved and adored, but it does lead into poetry where the position of mother enforces a feeling of displacement.

As discussed, the complexity of issues surrounding Dr. Spock, Ethel Rosenberg and the Cold War rhetoric provided a concept of mothering which is particular and prescriptive, yet also contains elusive meanings. In her study of the history of American housewives, Glenna Mathews summarizes the pressures of this era, by reflecting from a time when this cult began to be questioned:

By the 1960s, the woman who was supposed to provide emotional support for her family and in essence underwrite the psychological well-being of her society was all too likely to be herself in a state of demoralization. (1987:222)

This is certainly the nub of the debate, but I would expand the analogy further to clarify that the responsibility for the 'psychological well-being of her society' contains pressures of political and Cold War control. Plath presents women as mothers in more demanding, complex situations than merely mother and child reflections. When the woman's expressions become more expansive than simply relating to the child, the woman is still positioned as a mother, a position which relates to a historical understanding.

The 'babysitter' and Esther feel defeated as outsiders and observers, and Plath develops and complicates these emotions as the women of her writing become mothers. The mothers of 'Balloons' and 'Child' express these feelings, but through expressions of their love for their children. But Plath also has poems of more articulate rage and I feel that it is these which provide a reaction against the pressured responsibility of mothers.

Considerations of Plath's writing within the domestic sphere are conventionally concerned with her role as an individual mother. Critics vary in their understanding of Plath as a mother, ranging from the sympathetic to the denying, but she remains locked within personal relationships and understanding. The focus is fixed on the mother who is clearly interpreted as Plath, investigating how the situation relates to her personal experience. Interest is focused on poems such as 'Morning Song', which portray a maternal moment, concentrating on communication between the child and the mother, with critics focusing on an understanding of the traditionally maternal view.

The most complete example of Plath's writing exclusively about children is 'You're'. A love poem dedicated to the child during pregnancy, rather than the lover, it is a poem of continuous description. The images reflect the subject: it is like a child's picture book with multiple, bright images:

Snug as a bud and at home
 Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
 A creel of eels, all ripples.
 Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
 (1988:141)

The prevailing use of nursery similes presents a very clean, simple, and essentially playful image of pregnancy. 'Child' offers some of the recurring images of Plath's writing: the 'moon-skulled' baby, 'Gilled like a fish', suggest recurring images of fertility and development. 'You're' delights in its descriptions, creating images of birth and attachment: 'our traveled prawn'. The use of

pronouns introduces a sense of family and belonging, which is also combined with images from the domestic sphere:

Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
 [...]

O high-riser, my little loaf.

(1988:141)

This is a domestic world, the environment of the home is accentuated in images of the creative home; the birth of the child is positively linked to sewing and cooking, seeming to create a benevolent feminine sphere, with the added balance of 'our'. Delight in pregnancy is rooted in a domestic understanding. Although there are suggestions of a distance between the child's and the adult's perceptions, the poem is like a child's reflection; the picture book quality concentrates the delight on bonding, on the cementing of family and home.

Plath maintained this adoring depiction of children, writing of them in terms which are expansive and open in 'Morning Song':

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
 The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
 Took its place among the elements.

(1988:156)

The birth of a child is given the sure image of a watch, circling the birth in ideas of time and continuity. The descriptions of the child are fresh and animated: the baby's mouth opens 'clean as a cat's'; the child is described with clarity and precision.

And now you try
 Your handful of notes;
 The clear vowels rise like balloons.
 (1988:157)

There are, however, indications of stress in 'Morning Song'. The parents and the child's homecoming are more abstractly described, contrasting with the assured descriptions of the child. The form reflects a more mature debate; more complex than the similes describing the child:

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
 In a drafty museum, your nakedness
 Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.
 (1988:157)

The coldness and stiffness of these descriptions, the emptiness and the silence, contrasts with the clearness of image and sound surrounding the child. Mystery and complication pervade the adult relationships, while the child's and the mother's is shown as intimately responsive:

All night your moth-breath
 Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
 A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral

In my Victorian nightgown.

(1988:157)

The contrast between the intimate mother and child relationship and other emotions of distance and disjunction is reflected in Plath's other works which combine ideas of the simple love for a child, with more complex and often destructive feelings.

Plath's poem 'Child' is written in 1963 and offers a reinterpretation of her earlier responses between mother and child, particularly echoing the delight of 'You're'. It is short enough to quote in full:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.

I want to fill it with color and ducks,

The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate -

April snowdrop, Indian pipe,

Little

Stalk without wrinkle,

Pool in which images

Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous

Wringing of hands, this dark

Ceiling without a star.

(1988:265)

'Child' begins with the adoration of Plath's earlier work; the devotion to the child's simplicity and beauty, the pet names and descriptions which combine a child's imagination with an adult's knowledge. But there is an added dimension which introduces despair and uncertainty. The final stanza introduces a mother who can not participate, who can no longer engage with this child; the reader is drawn out of expressions of love into confusion. While the child remains a positive focus of mothering, the mother can no longer participate. Through the structure and typography, the emotions of the mother are gradually introduced. Although the images echo earlier joyous descriptions, the pacing is different, more disjointed. Fear is suppressed in the description of the child as 'the one absolutely beautiful thing'; as if it is the only thing to concentrate on. 'Child' is not an all embracing voice; desperation imbues the desire, 'I want to fill it with color and ducks', a need to cling to the mother role, to provide. The isolated 'Little', resting at the end of a stanza, signals a pause which is almost a slowing down, a drifting, or even forgetting; a distraction which reflects the 'troubled' mind since the positive images of the child are now filtered through the mother's despair. The final stanza changes from the initial shock or twist into an expression of despair which influences re-readings, as the poem becomes increasingly melancholy. 'Child' moves the concentration on to the role of mother; exploring the responsibility and the pressure of women's lives which causes emotional isolation.

These psychological distortions, the changes in perception surrounding the mother and child relationship, are further seen in 'Balloons'. The mothering role is moving into an uncomfortable realm, with expressions of depression and isolation. If we

consider society's understanding of mothering in Plath's time, we begin to perceive a weight of images and events which combine to create specific pressures on mothers, and we can identify these clusters of images in the poems which centre on mothering.

Plath's poetry contains a subtle dialogue concerning the concept of childrearing as a political industry, an idea MacPherson describes as 'sound citizen building' (1991:43). Plath's poetry offers a dialogue which recognizes the pressure this situation placed on the mother, creating women who represent the living consequences of this ideology, the poetry portraying emotional collapses which interpret the causes.

'Balloons' is placed within a domestic situation, situated by images of leftover Christmas balloons. Plath again employs pronouns to indicate a family: 'they have lived with us' and 'Such queer moons we live with'. 'Your small brother' creates a mother's sense of family and relation; she relates the children to herself. This awareness of family, the recognition of emotional bonds, is reflected in the simplicity of the balloons, of the life in the child's playthings. The balloons are given life, 'scooting' and 'trembling', 'oval-soul animals' moving in 'invisible air drifts'. Initially, the poem is calm in tone, a woman watching, observing and also dreaming, reflecting over the 'guileless' balloons. The dreamlike, drifting, yet precise and incisive, descriptions of the balloons are retreated from towards the final two stanzas as the image of the child directs towards a more descriptive and definitive understanding of the woman's sense of loneliness and despair. The images of the children remain within the childish descriptions which Plath uses:

Your small

Brother is making

His balloon squeak like a cat.

(1988:272)

This address to another sibling illustrates the mother's detachment from the delight and fun in the balloons. The tone expressing the children's simplicity is almost envious:

Seeming to see

A funny pink world he might bite on the other side of it,

(1988:272)

The child's ability to be fooled by illusion, and also to accept a changed world through the simplicity of a coloured balloon, is separate from the world of reality which the mother must inhabit. In 1960, Adrienne Rich confided similar feelings of fissure between mother and child to her journal:

Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted. And I am weak sometimes from held-in rage. (1981:1)

Rich expresses the frustration at the mother role within an era which limited the relationship to a destructive exclusiveness, reflected in the atmosphere of 'Balloons'. The mother's perception

of the children is tender and sympathetic; but as she draws back more clearly into the role of the mother, observing the children, her emotional withdrawal becomes increasingly powerful. The mother's perception of her child with a burst balloon captures the complexities of this relationship:

He bites

Then sits

Back, fat jug

Contemplating a world as clear as water.

A red

Shred in his little fist.

(1988:272)

The mother can see the simplicity of the child's view but cannot share it. Her perception of reality conveys the pain and weariness of the mother. The split of the final sentence from the rest of the poem, placing it in a decisive and defining position, slows down the pace. Hopelessness and despair are expressed, focusing onto this one image of emptiness. The 'red shred' suggests the fracturing and collapse of her mind, the colour of blood conveying the shred of life and reality that is left. Warren describes a similar emotion experienced by the 'Bay Area' women:

Their lack of contact with the outside world, together with their emotional dependence on their husbands, engendered a sense of alienation from reality and from self. (1987:56)

These feelings of detachment, of observing, avoid focusing on the women's mind, as the balloons provide a distraction. This image reflects another image of emptiness from Plath's poem 'Apprehensions':

The red wall winces continually:
A red fist, opening and closing,
Two grey, papery bags -
(1988:195)

The description of a body which is painful and tired echos the image of the child's fist, grasping the shred of the mother's life. The focus on balloons, while poetic and descriptive, also seem to be a diversion, an escape. The silence of the mother creates a feeling of despair: while her love for the children is conveyed, a detachment, a retreat into another world or reality, or really a noncommunicative reality, can also be identified; an inability to engage and express which is finally focused on the 'red shred'.

It is important to acknowledge how Plath's expressions of mothering correspond. In 'Balloons', reading the voice as essentially a mother's, expands the discussion of Plath's writing as a mother. Women are often placed in a domestic environment which is pressurized and confused, expressing the tensions of perfect mothering. 'Balloons' is a poem of contained emotion, of weariness and defeat offering scraps of images. If the focus of Plath as a mother is extended from images of woman clearly identified as mothers to considering poems where the role of mother is always hauntingly present, the understanding of

mothering in Plath's poetry, through an awareness of context, is given more depth.

Mothering is not exclusively portrayed as loving and bonding: a viciousness and an anger directed towards the domestic environment and the role of mother can often be identified. 'Viciousness in the kitchen' is the hissing beginning of 'Lesbos', and this phrase seems to contain the rage against domesticity and mothering which can be found in Plath. Plath's poetry is situated in a context and a historical moment; her poems of anger read as a reaction against a specific understanding of mothering and the pressure this role placed on women.

To understand Plath's expression of mothering in her poetry, it has to be recognized that the mother role is fundamental to many of the poems which do not specifically discuss a mother/child dyad but concentrate more clearly on the tensions and pressures of the mother role. It is perhaps more acceptable to discuss Plath as a mother in relation to her more tender writing, and they obviously provide an important balance to her frequent rage; but I would suggest that poems which are bitter and resentful are also poems about mothering. The poems are rooted in this position, not in a personal relation to her own children, but as providing an exploration of the pressures of mothering, feeding into the strictures of experts and state. Plath shows collapsed mothers, women defeated by the demands placed on their position.

The women found in 'The Tour' and 'Eavesdropper' contextualized the home as a centre of suspicion and uncertainty. Plath further articulates these tensions in relation to the distressed mothers' relationship with children. 'An Appearance' contrasts Plath's other meditations on children, such as 'Night

Dances', in that there is no clear linearity in the narrative, the images are disjointed and confused. These mothers are dislocated from an understanding of their relationships. They can be understood within a history of distressed mothers, which is not only a personal problem but a societal symptom.

Thematically, 'An Appearance' is complementary to Plath's poems of mothers watching children, describing the sights and emotions of these experiences. The mother's descriptions of her daughter echo other images of children, which seems to place 'An Appearance' in a benevolent context:

How her body opens and shuts -
A Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges!
(1988:189)

This recalls images from 'Morning Song':

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
(1988:156)

The child is still described as precious, but the language in 'An Appearance' is more complex, the description more abstract and confusing. Less certainty is expressed in the love or understanding felt towards the child. This is a mother who is uncertain and questioning:

Is this love then, this red material
Issuing from the steel needle that flies so blindingly?
(1988:189)

The mother and child relationship contains the defeated quality of 'Balloons', but the images are harsh. This child is not benign; the mother experiences a tension which often precisely focuses on the child. But the poem is constructed on contradictions; the mother is puzzled as to what 'to make of these contradictions', and is confused. Love and fear are expressed both for and of the child. The extreme confusions of the mother seem to be partly explored at the beginning: the startling opening lines introduce a context relating the women Plath's creates to a historical position:

The smile of iceboxes annihilates me.
 Such blue currents in the veins of my loved one!
 I hear her great heart purr.
 (1988:189)

These frightening lines pinpoint extreme danger in the everyday, the terror of submission to the mechanical made animate turns the domestic environment into a hellish yet insidious threat. The malevolence of the 'smile of iceboxes' attempts to defeat and subdue the mother. The personification of this electrical appliance, recalling the wide, rounded 1950s design, personifies the participation of the domestic situation in structuring a women's mental distress: the domestic interior symbolizing the increasing pressure and limitation of the housewife's life. She is defeated by the domestic environment, including the child and motherhood, represented by a symbol of American modernization. As the women's magazines' advertisements of the era illustrate,

iceboxes were often smiling their way into the home. The increasing promotion of household appliances, often presented as 'fun', clarifies the relevance of this image, directing the focus towards the housewife's feeling of defeat. This woman is not living the idealized life of the popular images of mothering and housewifery; in the context of the societal pressures on mothers, her concept of perfection is distorted by images of malevolence.

The image of 'blue currents' is linked to the icebox and electricity, the major power medium of the housewife's appliances. Electricity seems to be feared; the mother worries that it is inside her child, and it is the description of 'in the veins', which seems to direct towards an explanation of this fear. Carol Warren's *Madwives* includes case studies of women treated with electrotherapy: acknowledge as a popular treatment for women, perhaps more specifically, housewives, until recent history:

The Bay Area women were typical of state hospital patients of the fifties in that they were married women. In a survey of all schizophrenic first admissions to California state hospitals in 1953 and 1954, the researchers found that 55 percent of women patients were married at the time of admission, compared with 29 percent of men. (1987:25)

In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter confirms that: 'women are both statistically and representationally predominant as patients' (1993:205), creating a context for women's psychiatric care in this era. *The Bell Jar* incorporates this history as Esther is initially allocated electrotherapy by Dr. Gordon. As Esther walks

down the corridor towards her treatment, she encounters a patient just leaving:

As I followed Dr. Gordon, a door opened somewhere in the distance, and I hear a woman shouting.

All at once a nurse popped around the corner of the corridor ahead of us leading a woman in a blue bathrobe with shaggy, waist-length hair. Doctor Gordon stepped back, and I flattened against the wall.

As the woman was dragged by, waving her arms and struggling in the grip of the nurse, she was saying, 'I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window.'

(1980:150)

This depiction of a woman presumably returning from electrotherapy treatment suggests a wider awareness and influence on the narrative than the young Miss Greenwood's. Esther's understanding of the woman is solely in reference to herself, how this image affects her. The patient is older than Esther, and her presence must be influenced by the reader's knowledge of an older Esther. There is even the possibility of two women being treated: a voice is heard in the distance before this patient appears. All the recipients of electrotherapy in *The Bell Jar* are women, and although Esther is a teenager in this situation, older women are prevalent. Esther's introspective understanding does not elaborate on these other women's situations, but their presence indicates an awareness of the treatment for mature women. There is also, of course, the uncertain Mrs Tomolillo, who

is found both in the maternity and the psychiatric hospital. As *Madwives* illustrates, and *The Bell Jar* implies, it was very common for these women to be married and also to have children.

If it is accepted that the speaker of 'An Appearance' can be read as an emotionally disturbed mother, it is possible to interpret the 'blue currents' as the effects of electrotherapy on her own body: she worries about the potential genealogy of the treatment, imagining the 'blue currents in her veins' have been passed on to her daughter, as if she can conduct electricity. Domesticity is metaphorically connected to the treatment, which is connected to maternity. The baby's heart purrs like a refrigerator. The mother, in her state of defeat, images her treatment being passed on to her child, creating a circle of damage.

The anguished, angry voice of a defeated mother often interrupts other poems, either in an expression of defiance or despair. 'Event' expresses the inarticulateness of an adult relationship, of separateness and isolation, through images of dismemberment and loss. Within this expression of collapse, is the image of the baby:

The child in the white crib revolves and sighs,
 Opens its mouth now, demanding.
 His little face is carved in pained, red wood.
 (Plath 1988:194)

The woman expresses defeat towards the limited role of mother and wife. The language is not angry, there is still the gentleness of 'revolves and sighs' and 'little face', but a confrontation with the child is constantly draining the mother.

Like a carved puppet, his face becomes permanently fixed in an expression of demanding need. Frozen in instinctual expression, the mother perceives his expression as a permanent, carved wooded face continually demanding attention.

These voices of resignation, mothers who are manipulated by the maternal instinct, so that it commands or hurts them, contrasts with voices in Plath's poetry which are defiantly angry. 'Stopped Dead' is a vibrantly raging poem, wisecrackingly told by a sardonic, name-calling woman. Suspended in a state of balance, 'hung out over the dead drop' (1988:230), the woman seems to gain power over masculinity and money, but the power of maternity is always present. The opening lines:

A squeal of brakes.
Or is it a birth cry?
(1988:230)

determines the presence of a child, or the memory of a child, beginning to contextualize the persona as a mother; contrasting the brakes and the birth cry. This extreme woman, controlling, powerful, is only interrupted by a child, described as an irritating inconvenience:

We're here on a visit,
With a goddamn baby screaming off somewhere.
There's always a bloody baby in the air.
I'd call it a sunset, but
Whoever heard a sunset yowl like that?
(1988:230)

The baby in this poem does not belong to anyone. It seems a recurrence of the carved, permanently screaming babies found in other poems, but this persona articulates and commands her anger. Mothering is no longer a delight or a duty: this woman can't tolerate the 'goddamn baby', the 'bloody baby' that constantly interrupts her life. It is a constant background noise, 'screaming off somewhere.' This is a defiant release of the pressure and responsibility of mothering, ignoring the child through the fantasy release of being 'like a rich pretty girl,' (1988:230). The voice seems to mock Plath's other poems where children are tenderly described through similes comparing them to nature and childish images. By mocking a yowling sunset, this woman laughs at these ideas, scorning the possibility of the comparison between the child and the beauty and serenity of a sunset, a comparison which Plath's more delighted mothers may have considered. But within this release of anger and rage there is also a feeling of despair; although this mother is stamping her anger she admits that there is 'always a bloody baby in the air'. The mother is not allowed to relinquish her role, even for this fantasy. The aggression towards the child arises from its constant presence, the constant attendance that the mother alone has to provide, allowing screaming babies to become a constant refrain.

The frustration expressed towards mothering in Plath's poetry can be understood through further cultural positioning. In a societal realization, isolation appears to be the main cause for the collapse of housewives, many of them educated women discouraged from joining the workforce. The Smith Class of 1955, including Plath who was graduating Summa Cum Laude, were

reassured of the importance of their education by their commencement speaker, Adlai Stevenson:

But even more important is the fact, surely, that what you have learned here can fit you as nothing else can for the primary task of making homes and whole human beings in whom the rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry can take root. (1955:197)

Stevenson primarily presents women as carers and nurturers, manipulating their looming domestic role to seem worthy of their education. While Stevenson credits mothers with political and cultural importance, it is one which is expressive of and limited by the fears and paranoias of the era. At the heart of Stevenson's speech is an ideological debate, an appeal for women to shape an independent and democratic America through producing the right kind of children, or more specifically, men:

You may be hitched to one of these creatures we call 'Western man' and I think part of your job is to keep him Western, to keep him truly purposeful, to keep him whole. [...] This assignment for you, as wives and mothers, has great advantages. In the first place, it is homework. You can do it in the sitting room with a baby in your lap or in the kitchen with a can opener in your hands. (1955:196)

It seems almost unbelievable that Stevenson's rally to domesticity was intended to be inspirational. Even at the core of intellectual female life, a concentration was placed on mothering and its

importance to the state. Responsibility for a democratic country was repeatedly placed on the nurturing role of the mother. Women were thus placed in a political sphere within the domestic, and subsequently, any collapse of the homemaker is metaphorically linked to a denial of the state. Educated women were encouraged to channel their energies into the home, and to wear blinkers against issues concerning the wider world.

Ironically the daughter of Talcott Parsons, the sociologist instrumental in creating the model of the American nuclear family, underwent physical psychiatric treatment in the 1950s. Anne Parsons recalled that her therapy redefined her political paranoia as gender maladjustment. Homosexuality was a more acceptable diagnosis than the idea that women suffered from psychiatric problems because of repressive gender roles which denied political fears and expression.

The suppressions and tensions contained in the domestic situation are expressed in 'Lesbos'. It is an amazingly dense and articulate expression of the multitude of themes and pressures which revolve around the mother and wife's environment. The presentation of two women stuck in a kitchen which is 'all Hollywood, windowless', expressing the set stage of their fate; captures the defeated, yet frequently angry woman, within her context. While other poems submerge domestic imagery, 'Lesbos' situates the woman within it. The situation is contextualized for the reader, in terms of place and date:

Coy paper strips for doors -
 Stage curtains, a widow's frizz.
 (1988:227)

This is a 1950s home, the decor helping to personalize and contextualize the era in a specific context, allowing an understanding of the historical significance. Anger is expressed towards the concept of mothering and caring, which is directly related to the demands of perfect mothering; areas where advice was simultaneously prescriptive and evasive.

'Lesbos' begins in a malicious domestic situation:

Viciousness in the kitchen!

The potatoes hiss.

(1988:227)

The woman's supposed domain is aggressive towards her as Plath creates an environment which is fuelled with hostility. Symbols of domesticity and the kitchen, intertwined with specifically 1950s design, attack the senses to create a hostile and painfully distracting environment:

The fluorescent light winces on and off like a terrible migraine,
(1988:227)

The simile is the housewife's illness, the migraine of housekeeping. The simultaneous acknowledgement and trivialization of women's illness, concentrates on the duty of their position. The woman who is talking is 'doped and thick', and the scene is described through this clouded perception. This is a mother who needs drugs to maintain her routine.

This kitchen is a scene of chaos, of women not coping with the domestic situation. Plath creates images of housekeeping which were not discussed within women's articulation. In a society which sustains an illusion of women's lives, the images from 'Lesbos' appear shocking. The presence of the children are part of the chaos, whether it is a tantrum toddler or a passive baby:

And my child - look at her, face down on the floor,
 Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear -
 Why she is schizophrenic,
 Her face red and white, a panic,

[...]

You say I should drown my girl.
 She'll cut her throat if she's mad at two.
 The baby smiles, fat snail,
 From the polished lozenges of orange linoleum.
 You could eat him. He's a boy.
 (1988:227-28)

The daughter has the frozen face of demand found in descriptions of children in other Plath poems. The aggressive energy of the child reflects a disrupted domestic scene: the mother's detachment and resignation breeds anger in the child; they become caught in a circle of blame. In an era of Dr. Spock theorizing, the child's behaviour reflects on to the mother, a constant focus causing the mother to withdraw. Maxine L Margolis illuminates this tension: 'The message was clear: a weak

or negligent mother could create a moral monster to the detriment of all humanity.' (1984:37). Plath presents a domestic scene which is real, admitting the pressure cooker emotions of an adherence to a perfection that is impossible to maintain.

The description of the daughter as 'schizophrenic' contributes to the dialogue of illness and disruption: the 'terrible migraine', the 'sleeping pill'. An illustration of the extremity of the child's behaviour, it also reflects society's willingness to employ the mental illness label. Ideas of madness centre on women, and within this supposedly feminine sphere, there is a prevailing sense of animosity towards the female self.

In relation to Plath's other descriptions of children, 'fat snail' reveals the mother's changed attitude. The description has an edge to it, sounding slightly more like an insult than a pet name. The baby sits on the linoleum of 'polished lozenges'; although the image is like sweets, again a reference to medication is made.

The children reflect the mother's state of mind. Their presence is disruptive; the daughter's expressed anger interprets the mother's doped lethargy. There is not the outward expressiveness of 'Stopped Dead', with its energizing denial of the delights of babies; but a physicality of mothering which expresses the mother's exhaustion, revealing border of collapse:

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell.
(1988:228)

The taking of sleeping pills suggest a depression; a medication which women are more frequently prescribed than men. This indicates a situation which portrays the continual subjection of women in the domestic arena. Claire Tomalin, describing herself as 'of exactly the same generation as Plath' (1994:32), remembers her own domestic frustration:

In fact one of my most vivid memories of the mid-1950s is of crying onto a washbasin full of soapy grey baby clothes - there was no washing machines - while my handsome and adored husband was off playing football in the park on Sunday morning with all the delightful young men who had been friends to both of us at Cambridge three years earlier. I had wanted to do something with my life - I thought I had some capabilities, and here they were going down the plughole with the soapsuds. (1994:32)

As an earlier example, before she became a successful novelist, Harriet Beecher Stowe was immersed in a frustrating domesticity:

[...] sick of the smell of sour milk, and sour meat, and sour everything, and then the clothes will not dry, and no wet thing does, and everything smells mouldy; and altogether I feel as if I never want to eat again. (Mathews 1987:30)

Stowe's depression is expressed through the overhanging smell of domesticity, the pervasive mouldy and sour smells that come from the strain of cooking and cleaning, symbolizing the empty responsibility of housekeeping which was expected to fulfil a

woman's life. The 'stink' and the 'smell' of these kitchens represent the wastefulness of women's lives, issues which are engaged with in 'Lesbos'. However, Plath's work also interacts specifically with a Cold War society and the particular situation it created for mothers.

A pressure is placed on the role of mother which can be seen to arise from the era. Glenna Mathews summarizes the contradictions:

In an age of anxiety engendered by Cold War and the nuclear threat, the chief quality desired of women was that they be soothing. (1987:210)

The mother's responsibility was metaphorically to soothe the nation. The overwhelming claustrophobia of 'Lesbos' arises from this constrictive depiction of women. Two women enclosed in a kitchen, 'two venomous opposites', interpreting and reinterpreting each others lives; remain within personal debate which becomes too intense and unproductive. Criticisms of the children, of their husbands, the perversity of their relationships, seems to arise from their shuttered and sheltered lives. These women are trapped and parasitical:

You are so exhausted.
Your voice my ear-ring,
Flapping and sucking, blood-loving bat.
(1988:229)

The narrowness of their lives, the encouraged and unconsciously enforced domesticity, creates these embittered relationships. Neighbourly advice and feminine, mothering conversation is inverted:

I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.
(1988:228)

This advice from the neighbour, who is presented as sexually voracious and aggressive, is presented through a recognition of the speaker's distrust and distaste. The two women who are almost role playing: one the sanctimonious wife, the other a gossip and instigator. But the poem recognizes a reality that both the women share. As the speaker is leaving the other woman's house, she encapsulates the suffocation of domesticity:

I see your cute decor
Close on you like the fist of a baby
Or an anemone, [...]
(1988:229)

Society's insistence on the mother's satisfaction in the home and the family is a constriction, reflected in the baby's fist. The 'cute decor' that the glamorous wife seems to have enclosed herself in, is a prison. As the speaker's role appropriates her life, this suffocation is interpreted through the image of the child. Although there are attacks and judgements from the speaker

directed towards the other woman, they are sharing 'the smog of hell' and its isolation:

You peer from the door,
 Sad hag. 'Every woman's a whore.
 I can't communicate.'
 (1988:229)

A lack of communication and articulation reflects the futility of their lives; both reveal ways of retreat, but not revolution. They are trapped within their small lives, with no understanding or analysis. The inability of women to communicate, to understand the reality of their own lives in any viable terms, was to become Friedan's 'the problem that has no name'. Warren describes the situation of the Bay Area women in these terms:

They were lonely, isolated, dissatisfied, and depressed, but they did not link these and other life problems with the economic dependence and submission that characterized the gender role of the fifties wife. (1987:69)

This reflects the situation and era in which Marilyn French begins *The Women's Room*; an enclosed life, tranquilized by pills, alcohol or affairs. There is no connection or understanding between women, each isolated in her own home and responsibilities. These women do not have a discourse with which to articulate their lives, and so the resentment is turned inwards. Warren describes a 'latent and ill-articulated sense of protest among the women of the fifties' (1987:40), an observation which reflects on to the

atmosphere of 'Lesbos'. Within these closed, claustrophobic neighbour relationships, the women simultaneously communicate too much, dissecting their lives through a selfishness of self; and cannot communicate at all, only able to see threat in other women. There is only division in understanding; the hate for each other is based in hate of themselves.

Plath expands the understanding of these enclosed lives beyond a mere criticism of domesticity:

You who have blown your tubes like a bad radio
 Clear of voices and history, the staticky
 Noise of the new.
 (1988:228)

This is an attack on the sexual, unmaternal woman, a judgement which is connected to their mutual dislike. But there is a more complex connection between maternity and history: the tubes are both the woman's body and the transmitters of history. The woman's fertility is blown clear to make her more exclusively sexual, and memory, the cultural information, is blown clear. In *The Lonely Crowd*, David Reisman adopts the symbol of the radio to explain alienation from the self:

Without the noise of the radio, it seems, people feel as if their own receptors are dead. And indeed they have used the noise of the others to deaden the noise of the self.
 (1964:171)

Plath adds to this personal alienation the idea of historical amnesia found throughout her poetry. It seems essential for the consciousness to forget and deny, to be cleared of the weight of history. Within this context, the recent history, the holocaust and the terrors of the Cold War, are constantly replaced with the 'staticky noise of the new'. The housewife is fed the brightness of modern living, negating memory and history. The suburban life is so distant from this past, but Plath's poetry begins to betray this neurosis of the past, allowing images to resurface in unusual contexts. As 'Lesbos' attempts to submerge this past for a magazine future, images are shored up which convert themselves to a past of death penalties and ashy fallout:

The smog of cooking, the smog of hell

[...]

I try to keep him in,
 An old pole for the lightning,
 The acid baths, the skyfuls off of you.
 He lumps it down the plastic cobbled hill,
 Flogged trolley. The sparks are blue.
 The blue sparks spill,
 Splitting like quarts into a million bits.
 (1988:228)

Images of abuse and pain hint at images of the holocaust, of the Cold War electrocution of the Rosenbergs, and the psychiatric treatment of electrotherapy. Within the poem, images of the

containment of women are combined with an interpretation of history: integrating the personal, domestic realm of cooking and children, with a struggling social awareness. Women's political fears and anxieties were partially submerged in the domestic context. The anxiety which surrounds these images reveals the internalization of events which subsequently influence women's fantasies.

The isolation of suburbia, both in place and in consciousness, seems partly responsible for an increase of mental health problems for white, middle class women. Reflecting these problems, Plath's poetry follows the housewives into the hospital wards.

III Medicalization: A Critical Position

The positioning of women in hospitals approaches several issues. The hospital situation and the medication of the woman is used to explore notions of power and control within inherently patriarchal structures. Plath's poem, 'Three Women', explores the tensions which can arise from the position of patient. It is interesting to consider the subsequent broadcasts and publications of this dramatic poem. When the BBC first attempted a broadcast only one of the three actresses appeared for the recording and subsequently had to perform all three voices. This seems a fateful accident, one which accentuates the collectivity of the women's voices; the joy of First Voice, the desolation of Second Voice and the confusion of Third Voice, combine to offer an exploration of

women and maternity. This unification of the poetic voice and intention is in contrast to the 1968 publication of *Three Women*. Plath's numerical voices are replaced by labelling the women, Wife, Secretary and Girl respectively. This labelling is in direct conflict with the emotions of the poem and Plath's expression of the mutability of women's identity. As voices, these women explore their positions, free from the labels which only serve to limit their expression and understanding of the experience. First Voice, who never mentions a husband, is denoted as Wife, and Second Voice, who is seen at work, is labelled Secretary, even though, through a struggle for identity and role, she finally labels herself:

I find myself again. I am no shadow
 Though there is a shadow starting from my feet. I am a wife.
 (1988:187)

The hospital and the maternity ward are seen to be governed by masculine perception of women. Although there are three women in the maternity ward, there is no communication between them, each is isolated and separate. This is a poem concerned with the physical body of the woman, yet the struggle for articulation and understanding, expressed at times by all three women, expresses feelings of emotional displacement in the maternity ward.

Second Voice expresses anger about the experience of hospitalization, about the treatment and the insidious evaluation of women in the maternity ward:

And then there were other faces. The faces of nations,
Governments, parliaments, societies,
The faceless faces of important men.

It is these men I mind:

They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are
jealous gods

That would have the whole world flat because they are.

I see the Father conversing with the Son.

Such flatness cannot but be holy.

'Let us make a heaven,' they say.

'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.'

(1988:179)

Satisfaction in the experience of maternity is seen to be a struggle in a society which is ruled and controlled by the symbolism of 'flatness'; the masculine world of 'Governments, parliaments, societies', which negates the experience of women. Second Voice sees pregnancy as devalued; conceived in a society which focuses on the masculine, she can feel no expression as a mother. The experience of miscarriage makes her feel isolated in a society which structures itself on masculinity, and a contradictory reverence and devaluation of motherhood. She cannot satisfy herself with an identity; the interpretation of her failure leads to an anger against the misunderstanding of her grief and self:

The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity.

It is usual, they say, for such a thing to happen.

It is usual in my life, and the lives of others.
 I am one in five, something like that. I am not hopeless.
 I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick.

[...]

I can love my husband, who will understand.
 Who will love me through the blur of my deformity
 As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue.

And so I stand, a little sightless. So I walk
 Away on wheels, instead of legs, they serve me well.
 And learn to speak with fingers, not a tongue.
 (1988:183-84)

The hospital experience demands a submissive and obedient patient. Complete subjection and passivity are embraced by the women when she relinquishes the symbols of her femininity. The return of the lipstick is the returning of female identity. The dejection and grief is confirmed by the effacement of the hospital experience; a further humiliation and desensitization. The woman feels trapped within male constructions; unable to transcend a purely physical evaluation that pregnancy would momentarily allow. She appears to be doubly isolated and ignored; as a woman among men, and as a childless woman among mothers. There seems almost an inevitability in the husband's understanding, a predictability which does not appear reassuring. Second Voice feels trapped within such a perfect position of isolation: neither the nurses nor her husband can appreciate the loss which they

attempt to trivialize, or, more precisely, rationalize into a masculine desire for numbers.

A concentration is placed on the suppression and secrecy experienced by Second Voice, the exclusion of her femininity and the inarticulateness of her experience:

And the man I work for laughed: 'Have you seen something awful?

You are so white suddenly.' And I said nothing.

[...]

This woman who meets me in windows - she is neat.

So neat she is transparent, like a spirit.

How shyly she superimposes her neat self

(1988:177-84)

The laugh of the male boss is obviously unintentional and oblivious to the situation, but it is still indicative of the masculine interpretations and controls over her life. The hospital experience seems to have subdued her, accentuated a constructed femininity for the release into a society of mirrors and images. Hospitalization does not relate to her experience of miscarriage but becomes a separate experience which restructures her outward identity, but not her inner confusion.

A desire for effacement is expressed in 'Tulips', a poem contextualized in a hospital bed, where a woman is isolated and excluded, 'learning peacefulness', succumbing to submission and

passivity, surrendering to the medical patriarchy and the symbols of authority. 'Tulips' portrays the stripping of a woman's identity within the hospital environment, and probes the female complicity in the situation:

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
 To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
 How free it is, you have no idea how free-
 The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
 And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
 (1988:161)

She thankfully releases her identity and her consciousness to reach a position of effacement, disassociation from the self. She feels a desire to be the perpetual patient and a willingness to relinquish her cultural role. The desire to slip towards a waxen state, is usually associated with a death wish, or with a female propensity to submission. The extent to which the woman passively accepts the sublimation of the self, the erosion of the body and consciousness to an image of pure light, suggests not a self-denying masochism, but a need for an escape and a retreat, a path into a female consciousness which has been eroded in the process.

It is the tulips which drag and hurt and disturb the woman back into a troubled consciousness. She is surveyed and scrutinized by the vivid red flowers, their presence demanding and intrusive, forcing a relationship with her body and consciousness:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
 Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
 Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.
 Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.
 (1988:161)

This extremely vivid image begins a reinforcement of motherhood; after being as helpless and as cared for as a baby, a breathing, whispering, swaddled redness converses, not with the woman, but with her wound. The image and language of 'wound' is imbued with references surrounding the female body and consciousness. The linkage between language and sexuality introduces a system of images concerning both physicality and consciousness. Penelope Mortimer's novel *The Pumpkin Eater* offers a comparable image to Plath's, providing an echo of the poetry that Plath produced. Although it is a novel which circulates around the womb, the physicality is underplayed. It is only when the central character has been sterilized, that there is an echo of the work that Plath was producing:

I went to the basin and was sick. I could feel the lips of my wound parting, as though my wound were laughing at me.
 (Mortimer 1987:114)

This section from *The Pumpkin Eater* expresses an animosity towards the female body, demonstrating the distance which has arisen between a woman's body and her mind within this novel. Her body has become a mocking enemy, all mouth. This sentence contains the powerful feelings of alienation and abjection found in

'Tulips'. The woman is rejected both by the hospital and her own body. The achievement of the wound mocks the speaker as it whispers and speaks separately from the woman. It is also the woman's own body laughing at her.

The Irigarayan word-play of 'tulips' suggests the sexual dimension of the separation between physicality and consciousness. The tulips in the patient's room signal a particularly gendered force and presence: the woman's sexuality, the physical correspondence of the body, drags her back from a state of purification. There is tension in the feeling of isolation and purification, the withdrawal of the body into free floating consciousness, the denial of sexuality:

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.
(1988:161)

The tulips have an increasingly sexual presence, the friction contained in the meaning of wound. There seems to be a more sexual dimension to the poem than is often suggested; the positive power of life is a complex image. The final stanza offers a positive submission to the body:

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
(1988:162)

The opening heart is an overwhelming love, the familiar flush of physical feeling found in Plath's poetry. This reclamation of the body is a return to an exclusively female self, sexual and productive, a return to life, but one which appears unavoidable, uncontrolled. The passivity of the patient seems connected to a freedom unattainable through a physically involved life, and the ambiguity of the final lines imply a less definite outcome:

The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country as far away as health.
(1988:162)

The patient is sucked back into a sexual, maternal role, a physical presence which does not seem to focus the consciousness, where the ungraspable notion of 'health' is still distant. The concentration on the patient's desire for a blank consciousness, a mind cleared of responsibility and any knowledge of the self suggests, within a contextual narrative, an illness which is more than purely physical. Similar to other Plath poems, 'Tulips' is firmly contextualized, the paraphernalia of the housewife's life is a reminder of her cultural positioning:

My patent overnight case like a black pillbox,
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.
(1988:160)

These images offer a historical context: an emotional blackmail that seems more abstractly connected to the cultural role of the

woman, than related to the poem's family. There is not a resentment but an emotional pain, the family scarring and delicately catching. Within these feelings, the presence of the family seems to be connected to the experience of hospitalization. As I have suggested, Plath's poems within a domestic setting explore the cultural position of women, and I would also suggest that her portrayals of hospitalized women allow readings of a search for consciousness to take place within a cultural narrative. The emotions and tensions of Plath's poetry corresponds with the history of hospitalized women in her era.

In *Impertinent Voices*, Liz Yorke's discussion of 'Tulips' recognizes the hospital as symbolizing the 'patriarchal logos'. While the role of patient and invalid has a special significance within the history of women's writing, Plath's description of the process of institutionalization invites a more provocative patriarchal interpretation:

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons.
(1988:160)

The woman becomes devoid of image, history and physicality as hospitals, medicine and technology seem to coordinate an effacement of the self. While this seems representative of the institutional social control of women, a more specifically historic implication can be identified.

There is a debate about the control of women's consciousness and sexuality in 'Tulips'. To place Plath's work in her historical

context, there is a specific resonance for the 1950s. Carol Warren suggests that for women in this era:

The vast literature on the sick role is focused around the idea of refuge; that to be labelled physically or mentally ill provides the individual with a way to escape his or her ordinary role demands. In the case of the fifties housewife, it appears that the sick role itself did not necessarily provide a refuge; rather it was the mental hospital that did so. (1987:96)

Plath's poems of hospitalization are often perceived as offering a masochistic view of women as welcoming the control of the patriarchal system. Certainly the poems do seem to acknowledge the need for refuge which comes out of the emotional collapse of wives and mothers. The attraction towards adopting the weak, sick role cannot be seen as inherently feminine; the structure of 'Tulips' reveals patterns which seem related to the particular psychiatric treatment of women in Plath's era.

Mary Daly's attack on the American medical system in *Gyn/Ecology* combines a criticism of patriarchal systems with a cultural awareness:

Both function to keep women supine, objectified, and degraded - a condition ritually symbolized by the gynecologist's stirrups and the psychiatrist's couch. (1979:229-30)

The alignment of medicine with psychiatry suggests the closeness of treatment between the two for women, the contiguity of illness and health. Carol Warren suggests the specific resonance of hospitalization for women living in the mid-century:

And for married women patients, the effect of mental health legislation in the fifties was to reinforce the patriarchal authority of the husband with the medical authority of the (usually male) psychiatrist. (1987:15)

The narrative of 'Tulips' can be focused into a more historical understanding. The illness and treatment is unspecified, but the situation could suggest psychiatric treatment:

I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
(1988:160)

The response to treatment is insular, a sense of rehabilitation which may suggests a recovery which is not exclusively physical. The cell-like sparsity that the woman has entered into creates an unspecified area of institutionalization and hospitalization. The woman as patient in Plath's texts moves among issues of sanity, sexuality and maternity. Plath reveals a fascination with the role of patient which slips between meanings of this experience for women. A shift is made from the physical to the spiritual; the emphasis placed on emotional isolation in 'Tulips' suggests a recovery from a breakdown which is more mental than physical.

An ambiguity surrounds the reason for hospitalization; and a concentration on recovery and consciousness could suggest a narrative more concerned with the psychiatric sphere and the female experience within this context. Although there is reference to a 'wound' there is no overt indication of what type of operation. In the 1950s psychiatric treatment was often physical with the popularity of administering electrotherapy, operating on the brain and insulin injections. The 'needles' and 'swabs' of 'Tulips' were not alien to psychiatric treatment.

The wife and mother in 'Tulips', who claims that she has 'nothing to do with explosions', recalls the struggling housewife of 'The Tour', and her distorted scene of domestic satisfaction, with her furnace which 'simply exploded one night.' This woman is 'learning peacefulness', learning passivity and acceptance. The poem's focus on the woman's state of mind, allows the issue of psychiatric treatment to be seen as the central issue.

The imagery of religious and ceremonial treatment found in Plath's poetry and journals echos the treatment of female psychiatric patients. The loss of identity, central in Plath's writing, is surely more acutely felt in the sphere of psychiatric treatment. Warren employs the observations of Erving Goffman in explaining the surrender of the female patients:

He [Goffman] notes the ceremony of 'identity stripping' by which the new mental patient is shorn of her or his former identity both symbolically and materially (the Bay Area women had to surrender their wedding rings upon admission), and the labelling process by which the self is reconstituted into the sick role. (1987:32)

The woman in 'Tulips' is to learn peacefulness, is to succumb to the sick role. Although it is a welcome emotional role for the woman, it can be seen as part of the hospital treatment. The relocation of the woman into a psychiatric sphere clarifies the social and historical placement of this poem.

The evaluation of mental illness into personally emotional terms is concomitant with a parallel rhetorical usage of mental illness language in Cold War propaganda. Susan Sontag's invaluable study of the effect of political and social rhetoric onto the public fear of cancer, *Illness as Metaphor*, recognizes the role of illness within the political arena:

Any important disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival. Something is said to be disease-like, meaning that it is disgusting or ugly. (1978:58)

To recognize the uses of illness as metaphor reveals the shaping of a public imagination. Cancer was widely used as metaphor for the communist threat, 'projected into a metaphor for the biggest enemy, the furthest goal.' (Sontag 1978:69). Although Sontag positions mental illness as the contemporary 'vehicle of our secular myth of self-transcendence' (1978:36), it could be further

suggested that the Cold War rhetoric also drew parallels between a fear of insanity and communism, both positioned as the other. The execution of the Rosenbergs by the electric chair seems like an extreme version of electrotherapy, a popular treatment for psychiatric patients. The connection between the Rosenbergs' execution and psychiatric treatment exposes the guilt imposed on these 'deviant' patients, the treatment experienced as a test or tribunal in which the female had to prove herself to be the norm.

Edgar J Hoover played a central role in the American battle for sanity. His study of communism *Master of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America* uses his characteristic rhetoric:

Ever since 1917, I have observed the rise of international communist efforts to infiltrate and infect our American way of life. [...]

[...] always seeking to penetrate the healthy body of American life and corrupt it. (1958:vi,87))

The adoption of medical language reinforces disease as a threat, linking the metaphors of invasion and infection to the self, to the personal body. Although the spread of communism is often described as like a cancer, the physical space for this metaphoric battle is often positioned as the mind. American political rhetoric seemed obsessed with the control and possession of the mind:

Communist members learn what to think, how to vote, what to say by a process of 'automatic osmosis' - the seeping of predigested thoughts along the party line into all subordinate minds, disciplined to accept. The members

become ideological sleepwalkers, drugged into complete obedience by an unconscious discipline.

(Hoover 1958:145)

Losing one's mind to communism employs metaphors of insanity. There are metaphoric links between the behaviour of psychiatric patients and the climate of suspicion in the Cold War. Political rhetoric propagated metaphors which linked disease, and more subtly, madness to the Communist threat. This rhetoric then linked national, family and personal mental health. These issues operate intertextually: there is an undertone of communists as insane, the American family is seen as the unit which is central in the protection of America, and the mother, through the concentration of child care issues, is placed at the centre of this controlling system. The psychiatric breakdown of the mother reverberates rhetorically through the atmosphere of suspicion and uncertainty. In a nation's shared subconscious, signs of insanity were linked with deviant behaviour which political propaganda was defining as an allegiance with and sympathy for communism.

Peter Conrad and Joseph Schneider discuss the status of illness and the patient in their study *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*. Although they evaluate the medical shift in perception for 'badness' to be redefined as illness, it is noted that the public perception does not change at the same rate:

Since the public conceptions of madness are less medicalized than the psychiatric conceptions, it is not surprising to find that popular attitudes stigmatize the mentally ill. Public

conceptions tend to view the mentally ill more as 'bad' than as 'sick'. (1980:58)

In the 1950s the National Association of Mental Health attempted to improve the population's understanding of mental illness, yet there remains a desire to personalize the behaviour, to label the person rather than the illness. When isolated within a hospital environment, 'In Plaster' suggests issues of the definition of deviancy in Plath's era and its particular relevance to women. The poem begins with the recognition of a split, but the persona quickly becomes the 'bad' half, and begins to perceive the white, calm, superior self as a separate identity:

She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was
(1988:158)

The speaker identifies herself as the 'bad' self, the difficult self who does not conform to the image of feminine whiteness. Within the hospital environment, Plath's image of the divided self feeds into issues concerning illness and health, or the good and the bad patient. The medical infantilization of women splits them into good and naughty children, one passive, the other demanding. 'In Plaster' seems obliquely to offer this medical division of women suffering from mental collapse:

She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
(1988:160)

The saintly self that the speaker rejects seems to be the perfect woman, yet in this hospital environment, she is also the perfect patient, the good self who is more central to the world of psychiatric definitions than medical. The 'ugly and hairy' self is trapped within her perfect other:

Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully.
(1988:160)

The 'bad patient' is contained and imprisoned within the acceptable self; the conscious self is restricted within the perfect image of herself, but she is preparing to become an individual self, free from the constraints of her white image. The opposition that Plath creates relates to the pressure to conform within the 1950s definition of women, the struggle to express an autonomous self. But it is important that Plath places this debate within a hospital environment, adding an extra dimension to the split between acceptable and difficult behaviour, raising issues concerning the medical control of women, and the links between insanity and deviance.

The imagery of 'In Plaster' seems to reflect these fears of the Cold War. The positioning of the ill person as 'bad', as disruptive and potentially subversive feeds into the rhetoric of the other in Cold War ideology. If we read Plath's poems within the appropriate social context, we come to understand the pressure felt by women in situations of domestic collapse, embroiled in issues of paranoia and suspicion, and to see that this is linked to the state of women who become patients, fluctuating between

good and bad behaviour, between passive and disruptive selves, between health and insanity. Plath's poems set within hospital environments are concerned with problems of self image, perhaps most obviously seen in 'Face Lift', but they also flirt with the symbols and instruments of psychiatry, images relevant to the political fervour of the time.

Images portraying the woman as patient can be found throughout Plath's writing. Issues of control and submission, of rebirth and effacement can be seen to reflect on the cultural treatment of women, and within the poetry situated in a medical environment, of the particularly medical entrapment of the body and the self. I would further suggest that the events of Plath's time, the rhetoric and imagination of the 1950s, reflects onto her expressions of fear and interpretations:

Even my best friend thinks I'm in the country
(1988:156)

A prevailing sense of secrecy and suppression is conveyed by Plath's poetry. Domestic events are imbued with images relating to a social context; the link that Plath draws between medical treatment and the treatment of the Rosenbergs is unavoidable in *The Bell Jar*, and I would suggest that the residual effects of this are seen to be surfacing in the poetry.

'Thalidomide' is an important recognition of Plath as a politically, domestically situated poet, revealing a boldness in the use of factual material. In this poem, Plath develops the understanding of mothering into another realm, transforming her images of children away from a reflection on the mother and more

clearly onto a reflection on society. 'Thalidomide' illustrates the breadth of Plath's exploration of mothering; yet it is often a neglected poem when critics consider Plath as a poet and mother. It combines a sense of the personal with a very specific context and position.

'Thalidomide' reveals a recognition of the interconnectedness of business, money and gender. By 1962, when the poem was written, the connection between the tranquilizing drug thalidomide and deformed babies was established and yet babies still suffered from the drug until the mid sixties. The poem sounds like a lament; the strange attractiveness of the Greek sounding name of the drug and the sonorous 'O half moon' introduction lends a mournful tone:

The indelible buds,

Knuckles at shoulder-blades, the
Faces that

Shove into being, dragging
The lopped

Blood-caul of absences.
(1988:252)

The poem physically resembles and emphasizes the deformity through the 'lopped' structure and uneven balance. The tone of the poem is tender and sorrowful; the amputations which 'crawl and appall' are described as buds and the cluster of knuckles in

place of arms are described as beauty yet undeveloped. The poem expresses sympathy for these pathetic lives which are shoved into life, yet there is a burst of rage towards the end of the poem:

White spit

Of indifference!

(1988:252)

This image seems like an attack. In the poem 'Amnesiac' Plath comments on money as the 'sperm fluid of it all.' (1988:233). 'Thalidomide' can be seen to repeat this idea of money as the most important and male dominated concern by spermatically suggestive imagery. 'White spit/Of indifference!' expresses contempt at a masculine controlled economy which profits from drug prescription. The poem's deformed babies invite images of Hiroshima, and Plath, when her poetry is viewed completely, betrays an intertextual imagination linking these situations. The use of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima is paralleled with the medical attack on Western women using thalidomide. The continued prescription of the drug is seen as a male indifference to the female body, within a maternal understanding.

Women in this era of domesticity did not have easy access to a political voice. Stephen E Ambrose describes the emotional effect of the supremacy of atomic weaponry and its potential for mass destruction:

Every crisis would strike terror into the hearts of people everywhere. There would be no security, no defence.
(1976:135)

In a psychiatric reevaluation of this era, women can be seen to be internalizing these fears in reaction to a feeling of exclusion from political expression:

Troubled housewives today have a legitimating cultural vocabulary that was virtually absent from the lives of these troubled madwives in the early months of 1958.
(Warren 1987:8)

The 'cultural vocabulary' which is seen to develop out of modern feminism has also led to a political vocabulary, one which combines the female position in history with a political perspective. For most women in Plath's generation, there was a pressure to remain excluded from political realization. Patricia Ellsberg recalls her own political silencing and the connection to motherhood:

[...] I was too absorbed with the birth and raising of our young son to be able to face the horrible realities of the nuclear threat. I remember sometimes as I was nursing Michael, my husband would talk about the likelihood that some nuclear weapons would explode somewhere within the next two decades. I would feel suffocated and begin to cry. I asked him to stop talking about it, as if silencing him would make the threat go away. (1989:85)

But the threat still existed, and there seems to have been an internalization of these fears; even though women tried to fill their lives with 'the stackity noise of the new', the despair and anguish towards history prevailed in their lives. I have shown how Plath developed this interference in her poetry; when the domestic and the political self become entangled, the domestic world is fuelled by pressures from the external world. I wish to develop this discussion further, considering how Plath articulated a political position outwith a socially domesticated consciousness. By exploring other image clusters recurring throughout the oeuvre, I hope to show that Plath's work also explicitly constructs a woman's consciousness by positioning the self in history.

Waist-deep in History

I read them the letter you sent me about the war, and it had a big effect. I wonder if you realize what a powerful document that letter was.

(September 21 1950 MS II Box 1 LL)

This praise is from a letter sent by Eddie Cohen to Plath in September 1950. They had recently undertaken a correspondence between Wellesley and Chicago, prompted by Cohen's admiration of Plath's story 'And Summer Will Not Come Again' published in *Seventeen*. This correspondence seem to reveal an emotionally concerned and involved Plath, disclosing an articulateness which is reflected in the private voice of her journals. Plath's letters reveal a political and historical awareness, exposing the extent to which she often structured her concerns within the context of political events. Although extracts from a letter Plath wrote to Cohen in 1950 are included in the published journals, the following sections are omitted:

There's much more to say. I could tell you how insane men are; how simple peaceful living can be had if only they'll stop before it's too late. I'd rather have half the world enslaved than have the whole world a radio active junk heap. The promise of a War To End Wars is slightly frayed around the edges. It is not human nature to kill; I'm human, and I have a great reverence for life, for the integrity of the individual, as you would say. But I guess you're a

Communist nowadays if you sign peace appeals. Ed, people don't seem to see that this negative Anti-communist attitude is destroying all the freedom of thought we've ever had. They don't see that in the hate of Russia, they're transferring all the hate they've ever had. Do you realize that if you stated your views, you'd no doubt be labelled a Communist? That's because everything they don't agree with is communist. Even if you're for Pacifism, you're a communist. They are so small-minded that they can't give anyone credit for wanting life and peace even more than world-domination. I get stared at in horror when I suggest that we are as guilty in this as Russia is; that we are war-mongers too. (May 14 1951 MS II Box 1 LL)

This is a youthful plea, one which is humanist rather than political, but it does reveal Plath to be aware of issues concerning identity and nationality, which she views through a skepticism about 'world domination'. She adopts a stance similar to that of Esther Greenwood at the opening of *The Bell Jar*. Within a political atmosphere, Esther identifies an unspecified 'they'; revealing the lack of politicizing of her ideals while situating herself in an opposing position. This extract reveals how Plath is positioning herself within a universal framework; she relates her concept of 'human nature' to an understanding of herself. She adopts a soft approach to communism, refusing to justify what she interprets as an aggressive American policy. She continues:

Another thing. If this is It, the great ultimate destruction, I've got to transfer my egotistical dreams of a leisurely,

expressive life for me to something else. After the insane thing is over, if I'm left, there'll be the job of building on chaos, on nothing, on quicksand. Maybe your kids could pick up from where you left off. The crazy thing about the first two wars being made to clear the world for unborn generations is that we generations don't seem to have a chance. Who are the fat prosperous movie producers that said: 'we may be weary of war, but it's better to fight. One steady look at the Politburo makes it obvious to any American that he could not endure existence in that vast concentration camp which is Russia and her satellites.' Will they have to put on a uniform? Hell, no. The movie intake will just rise as more and more try to escape for an hour, an evening. (May 14 1951 MS II Box 1 LL)

Plath recognizes the displacement of her individual desires for the urgency of understanding her political and historical time. Although her letter does not directly mention atomic warfare, she launches into an image of aftermath, of chaos, yet it is a detached, uninformed image; although Hiroshima and Nagasaki revealed a potential destruction, descriptions of the horrors were not fully accepted in 1950. The letter's sudden concentration seems to suggest the urgency, prominence and viability of this threat in Plath's consciousness. There is no doubt this reads as an impassioned letter, and it is an important text for discussing how Plath constructs a historical self. These letters provide a basis from which to consider Plath's understanding of cultural and political pressures, revealing the political consciousness that develops in her work.

Within a consideration of the construction of a historical self in Plath's writing, it is necessary to recognize the deliberate construction of herself within her biography. It is clear from Eddie Cohen's letter explains that he shared Plath's letters with friends, and that Plath was aware of this. Although Cohen's letters are extremely perceptive about Plath's character, and Plath no doubt found the correspondence liberating, she must have been aware that she was writing for an audience's approval. Cohen seems to accuse Plath of this manipulation towards the end of their relationship. When she asked for the return of her letters he claimed that the request:

[...] would indicate [...] that you write them for the sake of your own ego rather than the illumination of, or contact with the addressee. (April 28 1954 MS II Box 3 LL)

All correspondence involves constructing the self, and to read the private manuscripts of Plath is to become involved in a fruitless search for the identification and authenticity of self, yet it is tempting to accept the intense, articulate, involved Plath of these letters as the 'essential' Plath and ignore any evidence of self invention or construction. To adopt the idea of a politically involved and committed Plath enables the deconstruction of an essentially egotistical reputation, yet an ambiguity remains in the various renderings which detracts from enforcing a political consciousness. A political and personal self is entangled, the expression of one being defeated by the other. The reluctance to consider Plath's writing within a historical framework may be because she did not complete her own history. She is held in a

vacuum of ego, with little effort to connect her to an outside world; yet this is a distortion of Plath's life which was lived through and affected by history. Plath consistently perceives herself as a pacifist, adopting a position of reconciliation within a politically confrontational time. In December 1961, Plath wrote to her mother expressing her fear of oncoming history:

[...] I got so awfully depressed two weeks ago by reading two issues of *The Nation* - 'Juggernaut, the Warfare State' - all about the terrifying marriage of big business and the military in America and the forces of the John Birch Society, ect; and then another article about the repulsive shelter craze for fallout, all very factual, documented, and true, that I simply couldn't sleep for nights with all the warlike talk in the papers, such as Kennedy saying Krushchev would 'have no place to hide,' and the arms forces manuals indoctrinating soldiers about the 'inevitable' war with our 'implacable foe'. (1975:437-438)

Plath reveals a sensitivity towards the political pressures of her time; a concern with the increasing uncertainty of world affairs, concerns which become increasingly contextualized and informed. In an interview with Peter Orr in October 1962, in the midst of writing what could be described as her most politically involved poetry, Plath states:

And then, again, I'm rather a political person as well, so I suppose that's what part of it comes from. [...] I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it

shouldn't be a kind of shut box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. (Orr 1966:169-70)

This concern with 'the larger things, the bigger things' may be responsible for the critic's avoidance of perceiving Plath's work as emerging out of a political context, with many suggesting that the Holocaust was simply too 'big' a subject for her interpretation. This has limited an awareness of the way in which Plath's writing is permeated by political and historical issues in both an oblique and direct form; the eternal debate surrounding 'Daddy' has often excluded the identification of a 'political person' within Plath's writing. Her poetry takes a highly subjective form which often merges psychic with political and historical perceptions, but I would argue that by acknowledging the limits and problems of her 'political person', a clearer understanding of how these ideas are employed in her work becomes apparent.

Plath's approach to a political form is often oblique, even subliminal. In 'Context', an essay commissioned by *The London Magazine*, Plath articulates the association between the personal and political:

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America [...]. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of

Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard. Not about the testaments of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon.

In a sense these poems are deflections. I do not think they are an escape. (1986:92)

It is significant that Plath initially situates her feelings of horror within a fear of harmful genetic effects, immediately situating a feminine self within her discussion: a fear of damaged childbirth and mothering arises from her understanding of the effects of 'fallout', echoing back onto the deformed babies of 'Thalidomide'. This illustrates the 'sidelong fashion' in which images of, and allusions to, the 'larger things' appear and surface in the poetry. Plath recognizes an ellipsis of meaning in her texts, signifying and suggesting an extended use of metaphor.

As this is an investigation of ellipses and absences in the text, it is concerned essentially with Plath's poetry rather than prose, with a more abstract, 'sidelong' means of representation. When Plath's poetry is perceived as a whole, and the imagery is considered intertextually, there appear to be layers and residues of meaning. In light of a cultural understanding of historical events, Plath's images are inscribed into metaphors which explore a historical imagination.

The American population were initially ignorant of the human devastation of the Hiroshima bomb (Winkler 1993:30). A desire to end the conflict with the Japanese and a hardly contained delight at American supremacy, led to a celebratory mood. Plath recorded the event in her diary on the 8 August 1945:

Atom Bomb! At Portland we had a few minutes between trains and so we bought a newspaper. We learned that the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan and that it destroyed 60% of Hiroshima! This bomb, it is said by President Truman, can be used for constructive as well as destructive purposes. For instance, the same power may be used to cultivate and save food so that there will be no worry of the loss of crops or of starvation. Also, Russia has at last declared war on Japan, (the latter nation may capitulate within a few months many people hope.)
(August 8 1945 MS II Box 7 LL)

The patriotic buoyancy of this twelve year old's account reflects the initial reaction of America. It wasn't until 1946, when an account of Hiroshima by John Hershey appeared in *The New Yorker*, that Americans learned fully the physical horrors, and absorbed the nightmare images into a national consciousness. Allan Winkler in his study *Life Under A Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom*, describes the effects of Hershey's account: 'Hiroshima left readers stunned. It gave them a sense of what the Japanese had experienced, a framework within which to incorporate images of the bomb.' (1993:31). Plath's naive

jubilant turns to disgust and even shame when the images and reception of the atomic effects become more accurate:

They're really going to mash the world up this time, the damn fools. When I heard that description of the VICTIMS of Nagasaki I was sick: 'And we saw what first looked like lizards crawling up the hill, croaking. It got lighter and we could see that it was humans, their skin burned off, and their bodies broken where they had been thrown against something.' Sounds like something out of a horror story. God save us from doing that again. For the United States did that. Our guilt, my country. No, never again.
(Journal 1950-51:84-85 Smith)

This journal entry from 1951 is also omitted from the published journals, an omission contributing to the interpretation of Plath's work as purely introspective. Images from Nagasaki, lizard-like people, skin burned off, almost unrecognizable as human, feed into the images of Plath's poetry. Plath recognizes that her work is not political in the conventional sense, in that the poems do not contain polemic discussion, but she recognizes the presence of unconscious connections between her imaginative narratives and the historical landscape.

As a comparison to Plath, it is useful to consider the impact of the Holocaust survivors on the work of the sculptor Leonard Baskin. The survivors were said to resemble:

[...] the flayed corpses of a Leonard Baskin woodcut, whose ebony nerves and muscles expose a peeled humanity

deprived of the elementary cloak of epidermal dignity.
(Langer 1975:188)

Baskin's sculptures confront the horrors of the twentieth century. Plath's poem 'Sculptor' is based on a visit to Baskin's studio. Eileen Aird draws a comparison between the visual images of 'Sculptor', 'The Disquieting Muses' and the more overt images of her later poems:

The description of them as 'Mouthless, eyeless with stitched bald head' recalls not only the 'bald angel' of 'Sculptor' but also the mutilations of Hiroshima and Dachau which figure so prominently in the later poetry. (1975:23)

The recognition between the covert and the overt in Plath's treatment of these images is important for evaluating the way in which these images tend to surface within unusual contexts in the earlier poetry. While 'Sculptor' appears to be a debate about the nature of art and the role of the artist, it also incorporates images of testimony and remembrance:

Our bodies flicker

Toward extinction in those eyes
Which, without him, were beggared
Of place, time, and their bodies.
Emulous spirits make discord,

Try entry, entry nightmares

Under his chisel bequeaths
 Them life livelier than ours
 A soldier's repose than death's.
 (1988:92)

The sculptures appear to realize a historical moment, returning 'place, time, and their bodies', and, like a commemoration, these memories are given everlasting life. There is perhaps a parallel between the progression of Baskin's and Plath's work in relation to these images and concerns, a relation between the symbolic and the representational. At this early stage in her writing, the expression and understanding of a historical self is released only through a subliminal metaphoric usage. Although Plath's literary reaction to these horrors is suspended, she is aware of these images; undertones of fearful images and expressions become part of the imaginative consciousness, and her work reacts to history through a framework of references.

Commentaries and description of Hiroshima and Nagasaki eventually described the human effects, the hellish scenes:

Many of those who survived were horribly burned. Ibuse described a Hiroshima resident, whose 'back was red and lumpy like a turkey's comb, and the skin had come off like a sheet of oiled paper.' (Winkler 1993:23)

These extremely evocative and horrific images were presented to the American consciousness, profoundly affecting the understanding of war in this century. 'Berck-Plage' reveals the pressure of this on Plath's writing:

This is the side of a man: his red ribs,

The nerves bursting like trees, [...]

(1988:198)

Winkler quotes the memories of Yatsue Urata as he wrote about Nagasaki six months after the bombing:

The skin was peeling of his face and chest and hands. He was black all over - I suppose it was dirt that had stuck to him where the skin had peeled off; his whole body was coated with it and the blood trickling from his wounds made red streaks in the black. (1993:23)

Winkler also notes: 'Kimono patterns were sometimes burned into remaining skin.' (1993:23). These visual images of peeling skin can be seen to be used metaphorically in Plath's poetry which contains the reference point in an oblique or overt manner. Plath's poetry becomes more overtly concerned with a historical positioning and understanding through an extended use of metaphor. As an exploration of memory, 'Amnesiac' is central in defining Plath's relationship to history. Man's relation to memory and history is described in imagery which relates back to these ideas, as Plath can be seen to further develop the concept of a 'peeled humanity':

Old happenings

Peel from his skin.

(1988:233)

The impact of the poem is understood through a subliminal historical image. 'Face Lift' contains the ominous line:

Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper.

(1988:156)

A continual understanding and construction of the self through a historical reference is suggested.

Plath's poetry offers historically suggestive images within unsuspected contexts. Her poem 'I Want, I Want' uses Christian imagery in an almost medieval depiction; symbolism and metonymy revealing the 'inveterate patriarch'. The descriptions evoke biblical woodcuts, and the poem's rhythms recall the sonorous intonation of a sermon as the speaker:

Cried then for the father's blood
Who set wasp, wolf and shark to work,
Engineered the gannet's beak.

(1988:106)

But within these patristic descriptions, a parallel with a more contemporary horror can be identified:

Open-mouthed, the baby god
Cried out for the mother's dug.
The dry volcanoes cracked and split,

Sand abraded the milkless lip.

(1988:106)

Winkler echoes Masuji Ibuse's descriptions of the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima: 'Babies suckled the breasts of dead mothers; mothers clung to dead infants, [...].'
(1993:23). The shadow of death and futility is contained in Plath's image; within the context of a patristic discourse, the narrative of modern history surfaces.

The prevalence of chemical metaphors for the expression of torture and pain reflects the images and descriptions of Japan. Although Plath's work is seen to be expressing psychic pain, the configuration of the self is in contemporary, even historical, terms. 'Lesbos' contains the torture of 'acid baths'; and 'The Rival', 'A Birthday Present' and 'Poppies in October' use the metaphor of the poisonous gas carbon monoxide. 'The Rival' describes letters as:

White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.

(1988:166)

The suspense of 'A Birthday Present' reveals the pressure of the secrecy through an image of poisonous gas:

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.

Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.

(1988:207)

'Poppies in October', which describes almost photographically, like a snapshot, an instant of human connection, echoes this image of poisonous atmosphere:

A gift, a love gift
Utterly unasked for
By a sky

Palely and flamily
Igniting its carbon monoxides,
(1988:240)

The air, the atmosphere of these poems, is poisonous, revealing a world imagined through the pressures of the historical moment. 'The Couriers' includes in its list of falsities:

Acetic acid in a sealed tin?
Do not accept it. It is not genuine.
(1988:247)

Plath's images can be understood within a context, an era with a military concentration on poisonous gases and substances. As though it is part of a modern historical memory connected to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and further to the Jewish Holocaust, historical rhetoric seems to surface within the narrative of her poetry. Lawrence Langer quotes Karl Wolff's description of this process in relation to writers who are survivors of the Holocaust:

For Dachau, like Auschwitz and in a related sense like Hiroshima, is no longer merely a place-name with grim historical associations for those who care to pursue them. All three have been absorbed into the collective memory of the human continuity as independent symbols of a quality of experience more subtle, more complex, and elusive than the names themselves can possibly convey. The existence of Dachau and Auschwitz as historical phenomena has altered not only our conception of reality, but its very nature. (1975:xii)

The concern in Plath's poetry with poisonous, insidious substances seems to be relevant to the expression of a collective memory. When considering Plath's work in relation to these historical events, it is important to remember that as a woman and an American she is situated in a position which is often excluded from historical discourse. This is not to claim a precedence for her external experience, but to recognize that position. Plath's exploration of these metaphors is from a distance; part of recognizing the importance of history in her work is acknowledging this gap of experience. Plath's work often explores the process of assimilating these experiences through a media consciousness. Plath positions herself in history in reaction to a reception and imagining of these events, not an experiencing.

A correspondence exists between the literature and the memories of atrocity, and the metaphors of Plath's imaginative landscape. Her poetry seems to echo the literary images and metaphors of other writers. In Holocaust survivor fiction and testimonies, there is often a concentration on images of the sky, the sky turning black, and the lack of boundaries of identity, the

loss of reality and trust in nature. Plath's poem 'Ouija', while almost playfully exploring the words of the Ouija god, contains this image:

Skies once wearing a blue, diving hauteur
 Ravel above us, mistily descend,
 Thickening with motes, to a marriage with the mire.
 (1988:77)

'The Beast', section four of 'Poem for a Birthday', contains an image of uncertainty:

Down here the sky is always falling.
 (1988:134)

This alteration of landscape suggests a world where nature is disrupted, incomprehensible to human understanding. Paul Celan's poem 'Todesfuge' expresses the distortion of landscape during the Holocaust:

we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
 (1996:63)

Celan's poem questions the boundaries between fantasy and reality in this Holocaust realm where metaphor becomes a perverted actuality.

The images that Plath uses to illustrate a disrupted, unfamiliar world feed into the realities of the atrocities of the twentieth century. 'The Jailer' is a poem which explores the complexities of

sexual control and domination and could thus be seen to engage with the psychological sexual traumas of the Holocaust experience. Plath's imagery, in a way which could be related to 'Daddy', reveals an awareness of sexually provocative images:

He has been burning me with cigarettes,
 Pretending I am a negress with pink paws.
 I am myself. That is not enough.
 (1988:226)

The images and narrative of 'The Jailer' engages with pornographic stereotypes and scenarios which arise from a realm of aggression and dominance; the continual exploitation of the woman within the area of torture feeds into a historical reality. Plath transcribes and conflates imaginative experiences, revealing a subtext of concern in her work. 'The Jailer' reflects the uncertainty and questioning of other poems:

My ribs show. What have I eaten?
 Lies and smiles.
 Surely the sky is not that color,
 Surely the grass should be rippling.
 (1988:226)

The surroundings are unnatural as the woman experiences an altered landscape, one which reflects a central iconic image of the holocaust and Hiroshima; a sky black with incineration smoke, a sky filled with a blast to rival the sun. The centrality of the sky to the human understanding is connected to these atrocities.

One of the centrally symbolic ideas of Plath's poetry is her involvement with the image of 'ash'. As her work becomes increasingly historically aware, and as she struggles to define a self within this recognition, 'ash' operates as a significant metaphor. In the early poem 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower' she closes on the image:

[...] the radiant limb
Blows ash in each lover's eye; the ardent look
Blackens flesh to bone and devours them.
(1988:46)

The featuring of 'ash' before the image of incineration creates a symbolism parallel to what the poem is centrally concerned with. Although constructing a carefully crafted and self-conscious poem, teasing the heat of love, there is this final image of ignition and ash, interpreting the conceit through the realities of the modern world. When Plath's work moves into the more direct approach of a configuration of holocaust images, 'Fever 103 ' directly confronts and redirects an image from Japan:

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.
(1988:231)

The image of 'ash' also appears in 'Mary's Song', a poem often included in the generalization 'Holocaust poems':

Grey birds obsess my heart,
 Mouth-ash, ash of eye.
 (1988:257)

'Lady Lazarus' declares:

Ash, ash -
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there -

A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling.
 (1988:246)

This explains part of the fascination with 'ash' and its relevance to Plath's narrative. Within the context of this poem, it implicates the incinerations of the concentration camps, the duplicity and psychological persecutions of the Nazis. Although Lady Lazarus discovers some form of empowerment in her ashy landscape, reborn like a phoenix:

Out of the ash
 I rise with my red hair
 And I eat men like air.
 (1988:247)

she remains within the circumference of the Holocaust . Ash operates in the same way as the residual images of skin peeling

and the sky falling do; they present an imaginative landscape where the complexities of the twentieth century crowd the horizon. The recurrence of the image, both indirectly and explicitly within the realm of the Holocaust, is evidence of the painful interchanges between Plath's poetry and history. In a televised address to the nation and the world in October 1962, President Kennedy addressed the Cuban Missile Crisis:

We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth - but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced.

(Winkler 1993:174)

The presidential image feeds into the fears and realities of the era; the residue of fallout is echoed in reference to ashes. The public imagination was shaped by a rhetoric of inevitability. Plath's poetry reflects this cultural identity, and interprets it through a singular perspective. Her poems move between the presentation of a conscious self and the use of these situations to explore a psychic self; and a concomitant consideration and understanding of the metaphors which reveal Plath's work to be intensely contextual. In Plath's writing there is never really a division between the personal and the political as her writing negotiates the complex intertwining of self and society.

Ash operates on a metaphoric level: both as an image which contextualizes the horrors of the poem; and as an abstract reference to history and memory. Ash signifies a trace of memory; used as a refrain through the work, it encapsulates ideas

of repetition and denial. In the holocausts of the twentieth century, ash is the common residue and testament which focuses the need to cultivate memory. In this discussion, it is important to remember the historical placement of Plath as an American in order to understand the concerns and configurations of her poetry. Michael W. Messmer in the article 'Thinking It Through Completely: The Interpretation of Nuclear Culture', discusses Umberto Eco's concept of an American ideology which 'wants to establish reassurance through imitation.' (1988:402). Messmer describes the atomic testing on Bikini atoll initiated in 1946, less than a year after the deployment of the atom bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The American administration eagerly packaged a new image for atomic weapons with no regard for or reference to the recent past. A cultural understanding of this history is reflected both in the rhetorical refrains of Plath's poetry, the persistence of intertextual imagery; and in the moods of forgetfulness and passivity.

'Getting There' is a poem which appears to combine these aspects of Plath's poetry. Since the knowledge of Nazi deportations, the image of the train has become imbued with figurative and emotional meaning, becoming an intense and fearful symbol. The idea of a journey can be seen to be part of Plath's personal imagery; part of the accumulative process of reference and meaning. The image of the train often emerges as a metaphor within inconsistent narratives. Within a poem which appears as unstintingly playful as 'Metaphors', the train is a subtle allusion:

I've eaten a bag of green apples,

Boarded the train there's no getting off.

(1988:116)

Pregnancy is figured as a journey with an unavoidable destination, an image which feeds into the particular metaphorical baggage of the train. While the movement of people to concentration camps is in the memory, train journeys procure an eerie significance. 'Metaphors' is interesting for the connection in Plath's poetry between the personal and historical self.

'Metaphors' contains a feeling of strained inevitability, recognizing something monstrous in the altered body:

This loaf's big with its yeasty rising

(1988:116)

The sphere of 'Metaphors' is filled with almost ominous, uncertain images, and within this area of female experience is placed the uncertainty of the journey. This poem seems to admit a historical self; it is not enveloped in an exclusive presentation of mothering but seems to invite a more complex reading through the uncomfortable images of a grotesque self:

An elephant, a ponderous house,

A melon strolling on two tendrils.

(1988:116)

This poem is uneasy in its images, and its conclusion on the emblem of the train, seems to suggest an uncomfortable

configuration: the placement of the Holocaust at the centre of female experience.

Jacqueline Rose's interpretation of 'Getting There' describes the poem as 'one of her [Plath's] clearest indictments of God, man and the logos (the blind thirst for destination of all three).' (Rose 1992:148). Rose's understanding places Plath's work within a discussion of the central position of selfhood within a repeated phallogentrism, exploring ideas of repetition through an isolated ego. Without distracting from Rose's argument that the poem's final transcendence appears: 'not as solution, but as repetition', an inescapable rediscovery of the self; it could be recognized that the movement towards repetition and denial is contextually based, and the understanding of the woman within this sphere contributes towards an empathic reading of history in Plath's poetry.

'Getting There' begins:

How far is it?
 How far is it now?
 The gigantic gorilla interior
 Of the wheels move, they appall me-
 The terrible brains
 Of Krupp, black muzzles
 Revolving, the sound
 Punching out Absence! like cannon.
 (1988:247-48)

The opening is one of questioning and uncertainty, a blind movement which is set within an aggressively mechanistic

environment. 'Appall' and 'terrible' are favoured words within the Plath oeuvre, linking their significance to the emotional charge of other poems. The specification of 'Krupp', the German family company who manufactured steel and armaments, gives the poem a contextual impact which contributes towards Plath's reception of history. She begins to introduce ideas of memory and movement, the echoes of 'Absence!' resonating throughout the poem. As a contextual understanding, trains were the central image of absence; a word loaded with ideas of personal unaccountability, disappearance and loss; further introducing a concern with gaps and ellipses of meaning and memory.

The poem is situated within Russia, the narrative of a woman surrounded by the mechanisms of war, figured as a patriarchal landscape:

There is mud on my feet,
Thick, red and slipping. It is Adam's side,
This earth I rise from, and I in agony.
(1988:248)

Christian ideology is combined with an entrapment in modern history. The focus on destination, 'Insane for the destination', allows an interpretation which is critical of a patriarchal logos; yet the poem almost contradicts this movement with a concentration on the journey, which draws on imagery and iconography of modern history, creating a tableau of a journey before the final denouement.

The question:

Will there be fire, will there be bread?
(1988:248)

reflects on the trauma of connecting the Holocaust to language and reality. There remains a difficulty of comprehension towards the concentration camps; the uncertainty and disbelief of the train journey. On first seeing the gas ovens and the incinerators, prisoners often believed they were for baking bread. The horrifying conjunction of domestic ordinariness and macabre death releases the figure of the oven to unsettle any version of day to day stability. Plath's use of language invites questions of the nature of visual uncertainty, unstable reality and the narrow division that was created between comprehension and disbelief. In a poem which is resonating with 'Absence', there is an absence of understanding and boundaries.

Through the nightmare journey, which encounters images and traces of war and history, the speaker struggles for a meaning, a testament within her series of questions:

I shall bury the wounded like pupas,
I shall count and bury the dead.
(1988:249)

This statement is positioned between redemption and hopeless repetition. A concentration is placed on memory, on human ritual and respect: to count and record the dead is an effort to ensure permanence and remembrance, and to achieve recognition and meaning within this uncertain history. Yet, the wounded are to be buried 'like pupas.' There is uncertainty over whether this image

has a literal dimension, if the wounded are to be interpreted as the dead; but the concept of wounded in these modern situations extends to the emotionally wounded. It is a gentle, almost mythic image of the cocooning of people like pupas, the transitory state of insects, which seems redemptive in the connotations of rebirth. Yet, within a poem which is so desperately caught in the horrors of modern history, the rebirth may become part of the repetition; the continuation of suffering. 'The Applicant', although placed more exclusively within a gender framework, seems to provide a refrain for this situation:

We make new stock from the salt.
(1988:221)

The repetition of suffering is shown to be inevitable.

The speaker moves towards a final image of transcendence, echoing the movement of many of the later poems:

And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby.
(1988:249)

This is not the vengeful, empowered movement of Lady Lazarus, nor the metonymic queen bee of 'Stings':

Now she is flying

More terrible than she ever was, red
 Scar in the sky, red comet
 Over the engine that killed her -
 The mausoleum, the wax house.
 (1988:215)

The transcendental images in these poems are of fantasy proportions, a liberating movement expressed in aggressive, self-defining terms. The transcendence of 'Getting There' is offered within a historical interpretation, and the tone is so resigned, calm, passive, that it is not a vibrant transcendence but a repetition, a veiled return. Rose suggests that Plath pushes this figure of transcendence to self-immolation, an inescapable position of the isolate ego. This reading, however, could be interpreted from a more historical and contextual basis. The woman becomes involved in patterns of repetition, becomes involved in the patriarchal historical pattern, which is simultaneously the prevailing cultural pattern, of easeful amnesia and a resumption of history. 'Getting There' is a return to history; it is not a flying, escapist movement but a delicate return. The 'you' of this poem seems like a personification of history: the woman is cleansed of memory, the knowledge which has been gained on this journey. She appears from the 'black car of Lethe', from the abyss of history cleansed by the myth of forgetfulness.

The urgency for an absence of history, for the denial and dismissal of knowledge, is a constant concern in Plath's poetry. To return to Umberto Eco, America can be seen to be in the grip of a 'neurosis of a denied past' (Messmer 1988:404). The eagerness and enthusiasm with which the US undertook atomic tests in the

atmosphere and constant testing of weaponry reveals denial and repression of responsibility for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The deployment of the atomic bomb against Japan provided a precedence for a fear which is suppressed and denied, the imagery and horrors of the bomb only becoming fully recognized through the efforts of a later peace movement. In Plath's historical moment, the realities of a holocaust were consciously suppressed. The concern with memory and denial in Plath's poetry seems to correspond to this response in history. Neurosis about the past is expressed in Plath's poetry by the disruption of meaning by historical memory. Images resurface in unusual contexts and this often exposes America's attempt to submerge its past, and the world's response to the recognition of the Holocaust in Europe.

The denial of memory is symbolized by the discarding, removing of peeling skin, recalling images of holocaust experiences. In 'Ariel', a poem of supreme female energy, images of peeling are again deployed:

White

Godiva, I unpeel -

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

(1988:239)

Plath's dictionary marks the Hebrew meaning of ariel -- 'lioness of god', suggesting a powerful female presence. Plath's connection of the poem to Jewish history and meaning relates the personal act of discarding to a more universal desire for the removal of the pressures of the past.

Plath approaches the problems of this desire in the poem 'Insomniac' by allowing a relationship between the desire for sleep and the desire for the elimination of memory to develop a parallel between a state of sleepless and one of awareness. The impatient nights are described:

His forehead is bumpy as a sack of rocks.

Memories jostle each other for face-room like obsolete film stars.

[...]

The bald slots of his eyes stiffened wide-open

On the incessant heat-lightning flicker of situations.

(1988:163)

This man is kept awake by his insistent memories, forced to watch frames of his personal history, yet he is also in a state of awareness, of knowledge. Plath provides the sharpening contrast to his situation in the final stanza:

Already he can feel daylight, his white disease,

Creeping up with her hatful of trivial repetitions.

The city is a map of cheerful twitters now,

And everywhere people, eyes mica-silver and blank,

Are riding to work in rows, as if recently brainwashed.

(1988:163)

The final vision is of an unquestioning city, a place where the dawn is a daily rebirth of 'trivial repetitions.' Although it is a personal history which troubles the man, it is the role of memory which Plath identifies as his pursuer. This awareness excludes him from a world filled with automatons, people free from the burden of memory. The relationship between history and denial, the connection between personal memories and a collective memory, connects to the critique of societal gender in 'The Applicant'. An automatic society is also an obedient, unquestioning, unaware society, and Plath places this criticism within a Western, and specifically, American dialogue. In 1960, Plath assembled an astonishing collage of images. Jacqueline Rose describes their importance: 'It shows Plath immersed in war, consumerism, photography, and religion at the very moment she was starting to write the *Ariel* poems.' (Rose 1992:9). 'Insomniac', commonly seen as a transitional poem between the formalism of *The Colossus* and the experimentation of *Ariel*, corresponds with the intertextual ideas of the collage. In the collage, Eisenhower, a president who always reminded Plath of a moon-faced baby, appears mesmerically to address a nation while holding the playing cards of fate, wearing the word 'SLEEP' on his lapel like a medal. Reflecting this image, are a couple asleep with blind shields, accompanied by the caption 'It's 'HIS and HER Time' all over America.' Sleep is connected to an oblivious state: politicians are perceived as a controlling, pervasive body to be accepted and trusted within a soothing mass of consumerism. Plath seems to recognize a suppression of individual thought, of political challenge. 'Insomniac' reflects this unease: the alternative to a

troubled, restless state is revealed to be an automatic society where people behave as if 'recently brainwashed.'

In the later poem 'Amnesiac' Plath continues this line of thought, significantly remaining with a male persona who is now given an impassioned voice. 'Amnesiac' is more mocking of the desire for historical oblivion, interpreting the power to deny history as a masculine prerogative. In contrast, women are more commonly portrayed as struggling for understanding and a role within history. They don't have the luxury of denying a participation that they never had. The masculine desire for perfection is situated within the domestic world:

No use, no use, now, begging Recognize!

There is nothing to do with such a beautiful blank but smooth it.

Name, house, car keys,

The little toy wife -

Erased, sigh, sigh.

Four babies and a cocker!

(1988:232-33)

A noticeable comparison can be drawn with 'Tulips': the hospital setting, the sublimation of self, the surrendering of identity; but this is an energized, exuberant rush to the 'comet tail!'. Historical responsibility and personal, sexual responsibility is combined with the overtones of incest and memory:

Hugging his pillow

Like the red-haired sister he never dared to touch,
 He dreams of a new one -
 Barren, the lot are barren!

And of another color.

(1988:233)

The masculine is again shown to be living in a 'neurosis of a denied past', reduplicating his denied desires, but with a blissfully 'beautiful blank'. The cultural ideology of the time allowed for a susceptibility to the repetition of mistakes. World politicians, with the intensifying of the Cold War, revealed themselves to be capable of repeating the use of nuclear weapons, allowing another form of Holocaust. Society's acceptance, even confirmation of this threat, is reflected in the persona of 'Amnesiac' as once he forgets 'the red headed sister' he desired incestuously, he is able to guiltlessly dream of 'a new one'.

The waters of Lethe become symbolic of this need to submerge history which is overtly sexual and personal but also the desire to submerge the images and echoes of a cultural history and knowledge:

O sister, mother, wife,
 Sweet Lethe is my life.
 I am never, never, never coming home!
 (1988:233)

Plath wrote the poem 'Lyonesse' on the same day as 'Amnesiac' and it shares the central concern of historical memory. Plath employs the Arthurian legend of Lyonesse that was submerged by the sea coast of England, to explore the idea of historical positioning and remembrance. The concept of being submerged by the sea is previously used by Plath in the earlier poems 'Full Fathom Five' and 'Lorelei' which operate within a personal mythology of sexual understanding and shaping. In her later work, Plath can be seen to be embracing actual mythology in order to explore emotions and confusions generated by society's fears and anxieties. The poem begins with a refrain from 'Amnesiac':

No use whistling for Lyonesse!
 Sea-cold, sea-cold it certainly is.
 Take a look at the white, high berg on his forehead-

There's where it sunk.
 (1988:233-34)

The shadow of a patriarchal father god is present throughout this poem. As Cold War politicians became increasingly powerful in their military strength, they began to possess the power of a god; they were clearly possessing the fate of the world, of civilization. The mind, the consciousness, is revealed as the vanishing point.

There is confusion in the poem between salvation and ambivalence; care and negligence. The Lyonians seem to adjust to their expectations of Heaven, feeling a security in their destiny which is fatally misguided:

It never occurred that they had been forgot,
 That the big God
 Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip

Over the English cliff and under so much history!
 (1988:234)

Through a Christian framework of references Plath parallels the elimination, the erasure of mythological history, with a precarious future and present. The pressures and fears of this poem relate to contemporary frictions concerned with memory and denial. It is an unsympathetic God, which in his controlling patriarchal position, reflects on to the modern dimensions of a secular world:

They did not see him smile,
 Turn, like an animal,

In his cage of ether, his cage of stars.
 He'd had so many wars!
 The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.
 (1988:234)

It is an impassive God who desires the beautiful blank, the 'real Tabula Rasa.' Plath's work engages with the eternal search for a new world, a new start, one which involves the suppression of memory. As the God becomes immersed in his 'cage of ether', 'Lyonesse' becomes a parallel of the modern and the mythological.

These poems reveal Plath to be involved in a discussion of the approach towards the trauma of history by a shared consciousness which, because of the structuring of society, adopts a masculine approach. In contrast, other poems concerned with the acceptance and understanding of memory, position themselves more firmly within a feminine consciousness, demanding a different approach.

II

Plath's writing which explores the placement of the female within a psychic landscape, through domestic situations, engages with ideas of passivity and surrender. Poems such as 'Tulips' reveal a woman's personal release from 'history'; the submission of the self to a welcoming void. Plath retains this process in her writing but develops a more direct relationship between ideas of self and history, a narrowing of the gap between personal understanding and a political self. Interviewed by Peter Orr in October 1962, Plath responds to his questions concerning the relationship between poetry and history with:

I am not a historian but I find myself being more and more fascinated by history and now I find myself reading more and more about history. I am very interested in Napoleon, at the present: I'm interested in battles, in wars, in Gallipoli, the First World War and so on, and I think that as I age I am becoming more and more historical. (Orr 1966:169)

Of course, in questions arising from the construction of self, Plath was becoming infinitely more historical, becoming a historical construction in her person but, more centrally to this discussion, significantly in her work. In her explanation, it is the themes and references in her work which become immersed in history; she adapts an interest in 'history book' history to inspire myths and references. As a slight diversion from my main interest in Plath and the placement of her self within her cultural history, 'The Swarm' reveals a more conscious, referential use of history, structured around a Napoleonic framework.

In 'The Swarm', Plath's frame of reference involves a more traditional view of the self in relation to history and poetry. The narrator appears as an observer outside the events of the poem and removed from history. By focusing on a central figure, Napoleon, 'The Swarm' reflects traditional approaches to history:

It is you the knives are out for
At Waterloo, Waterloo, Napoleon,
The hump of Elba on your short back,
(1988:216)

Yet while the focus on the central obsession of a ruler reflects an interest in traditional history, Plath still positions the self within more recent and less assimilated history:

Russia, Poland and Germany!

[...]

The man with grey hands stands under the honeycomb
 Of their dreams, the hived station
 Where trains, faithful to their steel arcs,

Leave and arrive, and there is no end to the country.
 (1988:216-17)

Emblems of modern history emerge. Again, the figures of the train and the journey illustrate a repetitive movement in. Ellin Sarot, in her close exploration of 'The Swarm', recognizes the historical junctures in Plath's images:

With the naming of these countries, as if by compulsive
 anachronistic reference, the victims of Napoleon's war
 instantly become analogous to victims of the European
 Holocaust of more than a century later. (1987:50)

With its concentration on Napoleon, 'The Swarm' appears to be a historical poem in the sense that it fictionalizes and interprets the past. Plath's manuscript arrangements suggests that she was uncertain about where to position the poem. It is published in the Bee sequence but possibly Plath recognized that the poem, unlike the others in the sequence, lacks a central perspective. Yet Plath does include an allusion to modern history, a recognition of her own historical time, which continues the idea of the cyclical nature of history and the patriarchal controlling of history. In contrast to poems such as 'Mary's Song', which provide a position from which a gendered view of history is possible, 'The Swarm' does not offer

a central female identity yet a perceptible linkage of a contemporary self and its situation can still be identified.

'Cut' is a poem which appears to share the historical significance of 'The Swarm'. 'Cut' offers layers of history, beginning with an almost nursery rhyme construction:

What a thrill -
My thumb instead of an onion.

[...]

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.

[...]

Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.
(1988:235)

These are simple, almost pictorial images, playful in the employment of history, yet Plath's slant on history becomes increasingly troubled:

Whose side are they on?
O my
Homunculus, I am ill
I have taken a pill to kill

The thin
 Papery feeling.
 Saboteur,
 Kamikaze man-

The stain on your
 Gauze Ku Klux Klan
 (1988:235)

The 'thin/ Papery feeling' is a common expression of unease and dislocation in Plath's poetry, often connected to a disjuncture in the understanding of history. The historical images become more pertinent and contemporary. The feeling of physical pain within the narrative becomes related to the feeling of emptiness, of ineffectuality, the knowledge of history which becomes a burden. 'Elm' seems to intensify the growing feeling of incomprehension and inadequacy in Plath's poetry: within its mystic exploration of the feminine psyche is the admission: 'I am incapable of more knowledge.' (1988:193). History becomes such an immense responsibility that it can lead to feelings of powerlessness.

Plath's poetry and the construction of a self becomes sensitive to notions of time and knowledge within a historical framework. In 'A Birthday Present' the tension of knowledge and desire is counteracted by the presence of history:

There is one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.

It stands at my window, big as the sky.

It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center

Where split lives congeal and stiffen to history.

(1988:207-8)

'Letter in November' echoes this abstract notion of history:

This is my property.

Two times a day

I pace it, sniffing

The barbarous holly with its viridian

Scallops, pure iron,

And the wall of old corpses.

I love them.

I love them like history.

(1988:253)

'Winter Trees' also includes an approach to history, linking it to a relationship with nature:

Tasting the winds, that are footless,

Waist-deep in history -

(1988:258)

In other poems, the relationship between history and the self, the acceptance of the self and memory becomes problematic. Poems in which the female self is situated express a difficulty with comprehension and meaning; Plath seems to emphasize a trauma

of absence which relates to both a personal and a wider consciousness, and contributes towards an understanding of her more extravagant uses of historical material.

In poems which are concerned with the exploration of the self within history, the process of understanding and accepting modern history, and thus society, is often difficult. The mother observing her child in 'The Night Dances' is defeated by the vastness of emotion and the weight of knowledge:

The comets

Have such a space to cross,

Such coldness, forgetfulness.

So your gestures flake off-

Warm and human, then their pink light

Bleeding and peeling

Through the black amnesias of heaven.

(1988:250)

The mother's worries appear to be inexpressible as she struggles to understanding the human condition. The pleasures of mothering are disrupted by the burden of modern history which leads to feelings of incomprehension and pain. This is in direct contrast to the spirit of 'Nick and the Candlestick'; written only a week earlier. Here the poem seems to offer reconciliation of painful disruption through the achievement of a space for maternity within history. 'The Night Dances' is engulfed in

despair and incomprehension, displaying a longing for a stasis of maternity with an understanding that this must be overtaken by history. Maternity is seen as an incommunicable and effervescent pleasure that dissolves and disappears; a human history which lacks stability in the universe offered by Plath. The struggle to understand the position of the woman in an unsympathetic history, leads to an inarticulateness of the experience.

'The Munich Mannequins' reveals Plath to be concerned with the displacement of women in contemporary history, and with the difficulty of comprehending the self within a historical framework which is a result of this displacement. 'The Munich Mannequins' begins with a narcissistic understanding of the perception of women which is contextualized by a historical reference:

So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight

In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,

Naked and bald in their furs,

Orange lollies on silver sticks,

Intolerable, without mind.

(1988:263)

They are in a city of corruption and death, the weight and atmosphere of memory lies over the poem like the covering of snow. Snow is frequently associated with amnesia in Plath's poetry, the whiteness symbolizing a retreat into an obliterated

landscape. The Munich mannequins, in their perfection and infertility, are presented as a perversion, reflecting a troubled and incomprehensible history. The poem becomes concerned with failure of expression and denial of knowledge. The quietness of the evening hotel, the gentility of the quietly placed shoes, conceals difficulties with memory and expression:

O the domesticity of these windows,
The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery,

The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

Glittering
Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice.
(1988:263)

The normality and comfort of domesticity reinforces the fragility of the difference between restfulness and forgetfulness. The mannequins' infertility, which seems to symbolize decadence, and the country's inarticulateness, are tensions apparently lulled by this maternal environment. The burden of modern history is seen to lie with the slumbering Germans, asleep in 'their bottomless Stolz', who are forgetful of responsibility, and seem to embrace ignorance. The poem combines a maternal critique with a historical approach; in struggling to position and understand a

feminine consciousness within modern history, the suppression or lack of consciousness and memory is a recognized complication.

'Little Fugue' combines a narrative voice and persona with a historical context which reverberates on to Plath's understanding of the struggle for a historical self:

So the deaf and dumb
Signal the blind, and are ignored.

I like black statements.
(1988:187)

Communication and understanding collapse at the beginning of this poem. The state of fugue is essentially one of amnesia; in attempting to construct a consciousness the poet is trapped within an altered consciousness which excludes memory and knowledge. The desire for 'black statements' seems to suggest the need for simplicity and directness, even at the expense of deceit or ignorance. Once the context is recognized as historical, overtones of Nazi iconography can be detected; 'black statements' are seemingly an appeal to an unthinking, but eagerly accepting, mentality.

The significance of the personal in 'Little Fugue' illuminates one of the central concerns in understanding Plath's relationship with historical material. Her approach to Holocaust imagery and context, an argument further illuminated by 'Fever 103' and 'Daddy', is rooted within an American immigrant tradition, explored through a feminine consciousness. This is not to say that the work is biographically positioned, but that the work is

positioned within Plath's context and history, which is a shared historical consciousness. Her understanding arises partly from her culture. The introduction of the father figure in 'Little Fugue' begins the conflation of this icon with an historical dimension:

I see your voice
 Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

 A yew hedge of orders,
 Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
 Dead men cry from it.
 I am guilty of nothing.
 (1988:188)

Plath's imagination is becoming 'more and more historical.' The authority of the father is associated with his nation, signalling an alignment between masculine domestic power and controlling national power. The father's and daughter's communication is uncertain: his voice is seen rather than heard, appearing as an image rather than a sound. The iconic representation of the voice may reflect the power of language to control and influence people. Plath offers a child's perspective of monstrosity, the voice imbued with dead men, but it is one which echoes a brutal modern history which distorted language and the boundaries of reality: a child's fabrication becomes a historical actuality. The poem's renunciation of guilt, 'I am guilty of nothing', can be further understood if it is considered within an American context. To be an American against a backdrop of immigrant history is to undertake a rebirth, a transcendence from the history of the old

nation. The child denies a familial history and identity for the transcendence of America.

This concept is further developed through a familial memory:

There was a silence!

Great silence of another order.

I was seven, I knew nothing.

The world occurred.

You had one leg, and a Prussian mind.

Now similar clouds

Are spreading their vacuous sheets.

Do you say nothing?

I am lame in the memory.

(1988:188)

The child cannot control or comprehend events, but the adult self suggests a knowledge which is dysfunctional: 'I am lame in the memory.' Although this reflects the masculine expressions of amnesia in 'Amnesiac' and 'Insomniac' from a female perspective, it does not imply an active desire but a damage, a fracturing of memory. Plath is interacting with historical and familial memory, expressing the difficulty of constructing the self through a family identification in modern history. While the poem occurs within an American context, a fracturing of memory and responsibility is present.

It is important to notice that the issue of memory within a feminine consciousness is also intrinsically linked to the social

treatment of a feminine perspective. As previously discussed, the treatment of women as psychiatric patients placed them, within the prevailing American ideology, in a position of suspicion and distrust. Furthermore, electrotherapy could contribute to feelings of alienation and distance. Though the effects of ECT are not fully understood, it is recognized that it can affect the patient's memory, primarily short term memory, but it has also been suggested that it affects long term memory. Plath's awareness of personal memory as significant for understanding and recording history relates also to this essentially female experience. A connection can be seen between the exclusion of women from history, and their subsequent difficulty in claiming a self and a position within history, and a treatment which precipitated memory loss, and even the loss of an identity.

In one of Plath's late poems, 'Mystic', the idea of memory is returned to and encountered as elusive and unsatisfactory. Eileen Aird adopts a literal approach to the reading of this complex poem, suggesting it encounters the difficulty of accepting the knowledge of the mystic: of reconciling the spiritual and the domestic (1975:67). It seems to offer a more complex dilemma than this: is more concerned with attempting to understand and construct a realm outside the domestic and the personal. 'Mystic' struggles with articulation and comprehension:

The air is a mill of hooks -
Questions without answer,
(1988:268)

Plath's imagination inhabits an uncertain universe of unanswered questions. The clarification of meaning and the self is impossible; lack of stability and continuity still pervade:

Meaning leaks from the molecules.

(1988:269)

Meaning and certainty escapes even from the perspective of the mystic. It is the unsatisfactory nature of the spiritual that confuses understanding:

What is the remedy?

The pill of the Communion tablet,

The walking beside still water? Memory?

(1988:268)

The world outside the domestic, the historically contextualized world, is incomprehensible. 'Memory?' echoes in the poem to be rejected, either as ineffectual or, more pertinently, as redundant. The force of memory as a stabilizer of history and society is seen as disrupted, together with the spiritual basis. The denial and redundancy of memory, which has become a question without any answer, illustrates the struggle to interpret, whether in a spiritual or secular sense.

This discussion has shown Plath to be engaging with abstract notions of history, recognizing the centrality of memory to an understanding of a cultural self. Through repetitive imagery, which corresponds over the boundaries of individual poems, Plath

contextualizes the fears and anxieties of a historical self. The construction of history and society is connected to the construction of the self; through a personal exploration Plath confronts the meaning and inaccessibility of history within her context. Plath's early poetry presents an outsider position in relation to the knowledge of history. She figures herself as a non-participant, as a consciously American outsider and observer. 'Bitter Strawberries' is included in the Juvenilia section of *Collected Poems*, but it is also interesting to consider the draft copies of this poem. Plath approaches the Cold War conflict beginning with:

All that morning in the strawberry field
 They talked about the Russians.
 (1988:299)

This poem was written in 1950 and reveals a sensitivity to the culture of conflict. The earlier drafts reveal a more explicit imagination:

'The draft is passed,' the woman said.
 'We ought to have bombed them long ago.'
 'But they have children, too,' said Mary.

The sky was high and blue.
 Two children laughed at tag in the tall grass,
 Leaping awkward and long-legged
 Across the rutted road.

'I saw the pictures my brother brought back,'

Lois remarked, 'with the piles of babies,
 The incinerators...'
 'Don't,' pleaded the little girl with blonde braids.
 (MS II Box 7 LL)

The parallel between the American landscape and an imagined alternative history, shows Plath at an early age to be aware of the power of language and metaphor in the realm of history. 'Bitter Strawberries' recognizes the desire not to be exposed, combined with the dangers of distortion. In her mature poetry, Plath further develops the construction of a female consciousness and discourse through a historical understanding and concern. The difficulties encountered in positioning women within history pervade Plath's work as I have indicated. The historical pressures which condition these difficulties are most clearly observable in the directly referential 'Holocaust' poems.

As 'Thalidomide' confronts a sensitive situation from a personally historical position, 'Mary's Song' a more fragile, subtle image of the Holocaust than the dichotomy of 'Daddy' and the assertiveness of 'Lady Lazarus', also situates itself within a personal historical position. Specifically, 'Mary's Song' is not an exploration and explanation of the self through the metaphors. Religious iconography is combined with the domestic, feminine environment:

The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat.
 The fat
 Sacrifices its opacity....
 (1988:257)

The poem develops into images of: 'religious persecution and sacrifice where heretics are burnt at the stake and the smoke from the gas ovens of the twentieth century floats over Europe.' (Aird 1975:64). This conflation of different historical periods reveals Plath's concern with memory. Pain is repeated and merely takes different forms: the recurrence of suffering cannot be prevented by the 'golden child.' The religious imagery and concern of the poem is transfigured by the contemporary setting as the poem becomes consumed by contemporary images, metaphors which seem to cancel out or deny the efficacy of religion for the self increasingly defined by its context:

They settle. On the high

Precipice

That emptied one man into space

The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

(1988:257)

The reference to contemporary events, to the pressure of Cold War competition signals the increasing contextualization of the poem. On April 12 1961, the Soviets successfully launched the first man into space, an event which, perhaps inadvertently, exacerbated political tensions. The double emotion of this image, which launches the poem into a complex, precarious future, and yet is also beautifully weightless and precise, reflects the pressures of the era. The poem integrates images of the past, present and future, offering an uncertain vision. That beautifully

deployed 'empties' removes meaning from the triumphal flight. The political is within the domestic, altering the woman's perception of her surroundings. The positioning of female subjectivity, because of the alignment between the domestic and religious, genders history. It is a subjectivity which compresses these images against the image of the maternal; Plath situates the maternal within history through the progression of the image, and returns to a final maternal connection:

It is a heart,
This holocaust I walk in,
O golden child the world will kill and eat.
(1988:257)

The emotional response becomes imbued and weighted with historical meaning and understanding. Plath returns to the meaning of holocaust in an unspecified form in her search for some shared understanding of mass destruction. The poem remains within a domestic sphere while reaching out to articulate a female position in history. It is common to find traces of the configuration of the mother and child in religious terms in Plath's poetry. 'Nick and the Candlestick' concludes with:

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.

You are the baby in the barn.
(1988:242)

Plath expresses the redeeming power of motherhood; the centrality of the experience employed to understand a historical self. The oscillation between a religious understanding and sympathy, and the contextual mother, is illuminated in this poem. Plath's religious imagery is often centered around this image, which she allows to expand into a modern subjectivity. The domesticity of 'Mary's Song' presents the religious imagery within a constant reality to a woman struggling to define a position in history.

The poem 'Brasilia' echos some of these concerns, but through a plea to the position of the mother:

In the lane I meet sheep and wagons,
Red earth, motherly blood.
O You who eat

People like light rays, leave
This one
Mirror safe, unredeemed

By the dove's annihilation,
The glory
The power, the glory.
(1988:258-59)

Aggressive imagery is aligned with traditional symbols of peace; Christian iconography is combined with modern understanding. The mother, the woman, is seen to be defeated by history; she is struggling for preservation within its cycles, echoing the futility of the historical layering found in 'The Swarm'. Women remain on the margins of history as the masculine machinations are shown to be in opposition to the maternal.

Conversely, Plath's 'Holocaust' poetry attempts to recognize and interpret the self in history by placing the personal directly within the conflict. There is still a struggle to comprehend history but it is from a position of immediacy and involvement. 'Fever 103°' contains Plath's most explicit references to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, revealing the impact of atomic warfare on the consciousness. Images inescapably linked with wider human suffering become metaphors for feminine rebirth, reinvention and dissolution. Plath describes 'Fever 103°' as:

[...] about two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second.
(1988:293)

Plath identifies a connection between an overpowering sexuality, and the terrible power and destruction of hell. And her hell is conceived in contemporary terms:

The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!

Love, love, the low smokes roll
 From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.
 Such yellow sullen smokes
 Make their own element.
 (1988:231)

The 'low smokes' are feminized: the sense of smell, and the image of a 'snuffed candle' recalling Macbeth's words on the death of Lady Macbeth: 'Out, out, brief candle.' A feminization of this brightness, this burning, is combined with a powerful, manipulative sexuality; an intensity which is reflected in the poem's central persona:

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
 (1988:232)

The 'low smokes' are transcribed onto the image of Isadora Duncan's scarves, the signature of her sexuality which proved to be deadly, like the 'yellow sullen smokes'. These suggestions of powerful women become entrapped in this modern history, transfigured in images of destruction which reflects the dream-like landscape of the fever. It is an insidious, quiet, pervasive movement:

They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe

Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
(1988:231)

This image of an atomic wasteland is situated within a gendered imagination. The 'weak/ Hothouse baby' is unnaturally nurtured like an orchid in a manner that denies the efficacy, almost the existence, of the mother. The ghastliness of the orchid in its hanging basket is carried over to the about to be suffocated human life in its crib. The guilt of the west is collected into the woman's murderous fever which goes forth in 'sullen smokes' to suffocate the weak. Hothouses are supposed to protect frail plants but here they seem rather to be stifling them. The 'ghastly orchid' and the 'devilish leopard' subtly provide an exotic landscape, which threatens the domestic. It is a nightmare landscape of heat and quiet which Plath develops out of fever and sexuality, and referentially extends through her historicised imagination.

While exploring an understanding of the self within history, Plath also can be seen to be conscious of the gap between imagination and experience, and also recognizes the ways in which history is manipulatively conveyed. An earlier draft of 'Fever 103°' reflects the reference to history in 'Lesbos', the conveyance of information through a domestic situation:

All night I have heard

The meaningless cry of babies. Such a sea

Broods in the newsprint!

Fish-grease, fish-bones, refuse of atrocities.

(1988:294)

The domestic incorporation of the newsprint extracts the double interpretation of 'refuse'; both the domestic waste and the refusal of understanding, the need to ignore history.

The assimilation of images, the connections between the actual hellish landscapes and the internal imagination reveals the way in which Plath uses personal experiences to interpret history; the historical imagination can only be expressed and understood through finding a point of resemblance. It could be suggested that within this political landscape, the process reflects a woman's comprehension and reflection of these events. The self must be placed in history to provide understanding. The effects of fever integrate the effects of fallout:

Three days. Three nights.

Lemon water, chicken

Water, water make me retch.

(1988:232)

The association between the self and the victims of Nagasaki and Hiroshima is subtle, vague, even suppressed. This is most poetically evoked in the metaphor:

[...] I am a lantern-

My head a moon

Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin

Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

(1988:232)

This image captures the beauty and exquisiteness of traditional Japanese culture, a metaphor which takes the speaker further into the recognition of an Eastern past and history. In Plath's era of constraint and conformity for women, a political understanding was suppressed. For women to identify themselves as political figures needed the dynamics of feminism which generated a more direct approach to wider issues, 'bigger things'. In contrast, Plath's incorporation of this dialogue into her writing can be seen to reflect the limited interpretation of the era. 'Fever 103°' does obviously not belong to the genre of 'protest' literature but, through assimilation, it does present an understanding of the self in history, of the creation of an identity through an engagement with the past.

The areas of identification produced in 'Fever 103°' do not generate the same degree of outrage as Plath's positioning of the

historical self within a Holocaust landscape. There are obvious reasons for the differences in approach and reaction, perhaps centrally the impersonal holocaust of the Japanese compared to the immediate horrors of the Jewish Holocaust. The distance and otherness of Japanese culture seemed to suppress a consciousness of sympathy in Americans, blocking feelings of identification. The devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki related to cultural identification and patriotism in the way that the nightmares of the German concentration camps never did. The American satisfaction of war against the Japanese can even be seen to unite a fractured country against a common enemy, in contrast to the reception of fascism within an American consciousness. A partly European immigrant nation had to contain some conflicts of identification in relation to Europe. It is significant that Plath identifies the unacceptable, 'ugly and hairy' self as the racially identifiably 'old yellow one' (1988:158-60).

To situate a self within this historical context also connects to a sense of national identity. Plath, as a woman and an American, has two points of reference within a historical framework. To return to her journal entry, she expresses shame at an essential part of her being: 'Our guilt. My country.' An identification is made with the aggressor, the destroyer. Yet issues of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain within an abstract form, an oblique metaphoric use that never attempts the dichotomy or overt reference of 'Daddy'. While Plath's work merges images of the two, there is often a confusion surrounding the identity of the historic reference since undertones of torture and pain feed into the two experiences: although she chooses to most blatantly construct a self through an identification with the European

Holocaust. In an earlier draft of 'Lady Lazarus' a clear example of this parallel can be found:

These are my hands, my knees.
 I may be skin and bone,
 I may be Japanese
 (*Ariel* Mss. Smith)

Alvarez claims credit for the final omission of this comparison, advising that the usage was too obvious, although he later felt that Plath did need the metre. More interesting than the metre, however, is the conflation of two sets of victims, the assimilation of the atomic holocaust and the Jewish Holocaust. Plath seems to view these two events intertextually, so that the positioning of herself as a female and as an American becomes imbued with problems of representation. The psychological problems connected to the positioning of the self in 'Daddy', the paradoxical affiliation of the two extremes of self, can be seen, within Plath's own psychic framework, and I would suggest, a shared framework of her historical context, to contain a transference of perpetrator. The guilt for the American atrocity is embedded within European images.

The American suppression of responsibility erupts in 'Daddy' in a guilty fascination with Nazi iconography and power structures. As a prelude to understanding the use of metaphor in 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', Charlotte Crofts highlights the early Plath poem 'The Thin People'. She recognizes the attempt to position a self within this historical moment from the position of observer: 'They infiltrate everyday life in the post-Holocaust,

post-industrial world, as inevitably as the cycle of the moon.'
 (1995:52). 'The Thin People' places the outsider in the position of
 modern voyeur, experiencing history through a global framework:

They are always with us, the thin people
 Meagre of dimension as the grey people

On a movie-screen. They
 Are unreal, we say:

It was only in a movie, it was only
 In a war making evil headlines when we

Were small [...]
 (1988:64)

This early poem offers an awareness of the temptation of forgetfulness, and even prefigures a society saturated with images that increasingly begin to be perceived as unreal, fantastic, cinematic. The movie-screen provides a distance from events that allows for ambivalence and denial. With modern knowledge comes difficulties of representation, and Plath is shown in this poem to be struggling to find a position within this post-Holocaust world, which is viewed through a lens. Her evaluation of America's relationship with the cinema reveals an awareness of the cultural atmosphere of America, the need for fantasy and escapism within her society, reflected in the cinematic images of 'Daddy':

There's a stake in your fat black heart
 And the villagers never liked you.
 They are dancing and stamping on you.
 (1988:224)

Although 'The Thin People' situates itself within the European Holocaust, containing stereotypes and images which are to reappear in 'Daddy', the gap between fiction and reality, in that the thin people are present in dreams rather than the consciousness, suggests a need to suppress this knowledge. This could relate to a specifically Western knowledge, a feeling of guilt and denial, the realization of cruelty becoming part of the human condition. But Plath's writing and sensitivity recognizes a particularly American sense of guilt which is present within an altered context.

One of the central problems or difficulties of accepting 'Daddy' is accepting the position of identification. Plath's ambivalent use of metaphor is at the centre of protests about her use of language and imagery. The attack and the defence of 'Daddy' involves a debate over ownership, voice, experience. Most recent critics, such as James E Young and Jacqueline Rose, employ a discussion about fantasy and reality, and the dissolved boundaries of the unconscious and ownership, to justify Plath's involvement with these metaphors. Young argues that metaphoric language, by its very nature and meaning, eludes ownership of experience (1978). Rose adopts a psychoanalytic approach to demonstrate the extent to which a 'crisis of language and identity', signalling uncertainty about representation, is central to the poem (1992:228). It is interesting that a discussion of 'Daddy' forces critics sympathetic

to Plath's work to adopt a defensive position, as the idea of attack and adverse criticism has become excessively attached to the poem. The accusations levelled against Plath, mainly attacking the inappropriateness of her metaphors, can be seen to echo the reaction towards attempts by women writers to understand and present themselves through a historical discourse.

This movement towards a historical discourse can be found in such an unlikely text as Jane Austen's *Emma*, published in 1816. Mrs Elton is determinedly advising Jane on a suitable 'situation', to which Jane replies:

'[...] When I am quite determined as to the time, I am not at all afraid of being long unemployed. There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something - Offices for the sale - not quite of human flesh - but of human intellect.'

'Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition.'

'I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade,' replied Jane; 'governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies. (Chapter 35:300)

Jane employs a historical comparison which suggests an affiliation with the victim position. That this alignment is viewed as extreme is illustrated by Mrs Elton's reply, yet Jane moves from a slightly teasing comparison, surely designed to provoke, to

a repeated identification, one which seriously compares the misery of slavery with that of a governess. To express her discontent, Jane has to move to an extreme position, a perhaps unbalanced comparison.

Hermione Lee, in her introduction to Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, quotes Brenda R Silver's description of Woolf as 'the systematic reader of her culture.' (1991:xiii). Lee provides an image of Woolf collecting significant texts, extracts from newspapers, manifestos, questionnaires, memories, biographies and autobiographies' (1991:xiii), in an attempt to understanding her present history. Woolf's collection of cuttings recalls the Plath's critique of American society and culture expressed by a collage of advertising and newspaper images: her method reflecting the important expressive medium of her time. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf proposes an alignment between a political historical understanding and a consideration of Western patriarchy in order to evaluate the position of women within her culture: '[Feminists] were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state.' (1952:186). Quentin Bell explains the reception of Woolf's argument:

What really seemed wrong with the book - and I am speaking here of my own reaction at the time - was the attempt to involve a discussion of women's rights with the far more agonizing and immediate question of what we were to do in order to meet the ever-growing menace of Fascism and war. The connection between the two questions seemed tenuous and the positive suggestions wholly inadequate. [...]

But the true criticism of *Three Guineas* came from events;
for the events of 1938 did not turn upon the rights of
Women but upon the Rights of Nations. (1976:205)

Although it is viewed as inevitable that feminist concerns were overtaken by national concerns, it is the appropriateness of Woolf's comparison which is criticized. The affiliation that Woolf identified between a fascist and patriarchal logos is reflected in the employment of Nazi iconography in 'Daddy'. That Woolf was criticized for a tenuous link reflects the criticism levelled at Plath.

In arguing for a comparison between the approaches of Plath and Woolf, the obvious historical implications of their writing must also be considered. Woolf's relation to fascism and Nazism is from an abstract political position that is prior to the realization of the atrocities of fascism during World War II. Plath's comparisons must be recognized within a position of knowledge, within a reality which was hardly imagined in 1938. The construction of the self through this historical actuality is more complex: the similes which are used by Plath are engaged in a sexual dimension: an issue which is fully explored in Rose's chapter on the poem. But it is this connection between sexual conflicts and fascist ideology, which is approached by both writers, that suggests this prevailing connection in a female consciousness.

Alan Sinfield defends Plath's aesthetic by giving consideration to the social construction of Plath's writing:

Plath is saying - and I don't claim it is fully articulated, which is not surprising since it was a thought struggling into consciousness, scarcely anticipated in its period; she is

saying that Jews and women, both, have been among the victims of institutionalized violence in Western civilization. (1989:224)

This evaluation contributes towards understanding Plath's involvement with historical material. The formation of the woman as persecuted, within an era which was barely beginning to shape a modern feminist dialogue is problematic in assigning a perspective. While the speaker of the poem 'Daddy' remains in a victimized position, Plath explores the limits of power and possession in an actively aggressive form:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.
(1988:223)

This central problem of identification and metaphor may be easier understood and evaluated if the imaginative forces which brought Plath to this position of metaphor are considered. The American society which she experienced during her early years, and the British cultural position from which she wrote these poems, seems to offer a kind of justification, or at least a grounding, of her use of the metaphor.

The difficulty of articulating female victimhood, of expressing an increasing discontent seems to have led to a historical perspective. Women in this time were bereft of an effective discourse, a framework with which to understand their treatment and positioning. The cult of femininity, the concentration on

maternity, the limits placed on experience and expression, made it difficult for an accurate expression of feminism to emerge. The sociologist Hannah Gavron died at the age of twenty-nine, a year before the publication of her study *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers*. Although it has an expertly emotive title, the study seems unable to express the enormous significance of the subject at this crucial time: Gavron lacks an appropriate feminist framework for her discussion and evaluation. Many women who were attempting to express the political aspect of their lives lacked a satisfactory ideology and language. In 1963, Betty Friedan perhaps recognized a problem and provided an analysis, but she could not offer a solution or an active discourse. It seems that these struggles for articulation relied on a transfiguration of the female into other discourses.

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* employs the writing of Bruno Bettelheim to draw a comparison between the consciousness of American housewives and concentration camp inmates:

All this seems remote from the easy life of the American suburban housewife. But is her house in reality a comfortable concentration camp? Have not women who live in the image of the feminine mystique trapped themselves within the narrow walls of their homes? [...] American women are not, of course, being readied for mass extermination, but they are suffering a slow death of mind and spirit. [...] The suburban house is not a German concentration camp, nor are American housewives on their way to the gas chamber. But they are in a trap, and to escape they must, like the dancer, finally exercise their

human freedom, and recapture their sense of self.
(1963:307-309)

This extract reveals the limits of Friedan's theories, the absence of a feminist understanding, the restriction of real empowerment. Friedan is struggling for articulation and although she consistently denies it, she is drawing an equation between suffering and situation. Friedan controls the extremity of her work, yet she shows a movement towards this comparison. The position of the woman has to be understood and conveyed through another discourse. History is employed as an example through which to define the woman.

Plath's work, the conflation of a suffering self with a historical suffering, feeds into this emergence of modern feminism, where an affiliation of these icons and images becomes integral to feminist expression. To attempt to understand and articulate the increasing problematic of the female self, women had to revert to history and to a recognized discourse. Plath's use of these metaphors and icons, however problematic, does seem to reflect the progression of modern feminism.

As a final suggestion for the justified use of historical material in 'Daddy', it is useful to return to the criticism leveled at Woolf, and to recognize that while Woolf's measured feminism was to be overtaken by the 'Rights of Nations', Plath's extreme imagery rests on the threshold of the immensity of the modern feminist movement. Within her historical moment, she was engaging with the increasingly volatile expressions of the consciousness.

Modern history and the cultural moment are seen to be absorbed by Plath and they play a central role in the construction

of the female consciousness in Plath's work. She engages fully with the relevance and impact of modern history, her work emerging from a consciousness which was personally and politically engaged within the limits of her society. History is seen as essential to a female consciousness as Plath is aware of the increasing erosion of boundaries between the personal and political. Issues of history are not restricted to the Napoleonic references, but expand to embrace issues of the meaning of history, the acceptance of modern history, and the struggle to define a self within historical knowledge. The articulation of the female self is achieved through an employment of history, paralleling and comparing, but more centrally, history is understood and made relevant through a relation to the self, an acceptance of the historical being.

Claiming a Contemporary

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
(Plath 1988:224)

This image from Sylvia Plath's poem 'Daddy' provides an analogy for the way in which Plath is often reclaimed by other authors and poets attempting to incorporate and interpret her within their own fictions. Writers such as Marilyn French, Lisa Alther, and Erica Jong employ the image of Plath within their own writing, exploring issues of identity and selfhood. They provide a reaffirmation of Plath, seeming to reclaim Plath from the critical views which had previously interpreted her.

After the 1965 publication of *Ariel*, which remains the central text for critical interpretation until the *Collected Poems* in 1981, Plath increasingly becomes mythologized and isolated. Although studies such as Suzanne Juhasz's *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women*, begin to consider Plath within an emerging alternative canon, readings which solely discuss Plath appear to concentrate on exploring the work from an introspective, isolated perspective. An exception to this trend may be Eileen Aird's *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work*, published in 1973. This is an insightful study, offering close readings of Plath's texts, which seems to begin a tentative approach towards a feminist and cultural interpretation of Plath's writing:

Her originality, however, lies in her insistence that what has been traditionally regarded as a woman's world of domesticity, childbearing, marriage, is also a world which can contain the tragic. She draws from this female world themes which are visionary and supernatural; although it is a world which is eventually destroyed by death, her work is far from depressing because of the artistry with which she delineates her vision. (1975:14)

These observations are not, however, developed into an argument; the study limits itself to close readings, from *The Colossus* to *Ariel*, rather than considering the often arbitrary nature of the single volumes, and interpreting Plath's work collectively.

In 1967, in the second edition of *The New Poets*, M L Rosenthal categorizes Plath's work as 'confessional', connecting her to the self-exploratory work of Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke; a connection which surely did all poets a disservice. Although connecting Plath to a movement, which perhaps distracted from a singular approach, it limited and restricted a reading of Plath since it suggests an unavoidable link between an internal biography and the focus of the work. Even the label 'confessional poetry' encourages an identification, urging the reader to restrict the text to a personal life; to interpret the emotions of the poetry as insular and exclusive.

Edward Butscher's collection of essays *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and Her Work* published in 1977 after his biography of Plath, offers a critique of the writing which interacts with biographical information; the book is structured in two parts

designed to complement each other. There is a desire to understand Plath's work solely through references to her life. In his introduction Butscher asks:

What had happened to Sylvia Plath in the several-year gap between the publication of two books? More importantly what did this have to do with her ability to create an entirely new poetic idiom? (1979:4)

The insistence on biography to illuminate the poetry arrests any theoretical considerations.

In 1976, David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* adopts a psychiatric approach to Plath's writing which proposes a diagnosis of the poet as a key to the work. This method insists on an isolated perspective; a psychoanalytic approach which depends on a medical evaluation of Plath constructed through the poetry. Holbrook persistently categorizes Plath as schizophrenic, suggesting evidence from her biography and writing:

I believe that we cannot understand her poetry well, and at times not at all, unless we recognize that she has a topography of her own, which is that of the world as the schizoid individual sees it. (1988:5)

This approach limits the understanding of Plath's expression to questions of distortion; relegating Plath to the clichés of madness. Holbrook insists on an isolated interpretation of Plath, directly attacking the emerging feminist readings:

The followers of Women's Liberation movements who read Sylvia Plath from the platform are not aware, of course, that such a poem ['Three Women'] presents in some of its choruses an agonized, specifically schizoid view of female experience, love and birth: they take it all as 'the truth' about all women's experience. (1988:120)

Holbrook denies the inclusive nature of Plath's writing, attempting to negate an interpretation of Plath's work as embedded within a shared female experience; particularly intense, as I have previously argued, when read within a cultural context.

The other major study of the period is Judith Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* published in 1976. Kroll attempts to retreat from the biographical or confessional arena into a discussion concerning the mythological foundation of Plath's poetry. Arguing for a recognition of the development of a personal mythology, Kroll locates the centre of this at the suicidal moment, insisting on a fascination with death.

But in Plath's poetry, there is one overriding concern: the problem of rebirth or transcendence; and nearly everything in her poetry contributes either to the statement or to the envisioned resolution of this problem. (1978:3)

Although from this beginning there is a movement towards transcendence, the basis for recognizing a death drive in the poetry ultimately has recourse to biographical material.

Criticism of Plath during the 1970s focused on biographical, psychological or mythological interpretations. Limits are imposed on readings of Plath's work; critics determined to understand Plath along with her writing constantly interact with the focal point of suicide. Plath's death is allowed to reflect back upon her writing in a way which stresses the individual aspect of her life. She becomes enclosed and alien; becoming progressively constructed as an almost literary pariah; seeming to enclose the fears of femininity, aggression, rage, and death. There is almost an encouraged fear of Plath: her writing seemingly foreign to literary criticism, critics often resorting to popular tropes for the female writer; death and madness. It appears that the initial orthodox literary criticism did not have the language or the insight to consider Plath beyond an isolate ego, to recognize a dimension in her work which bases her imagery and concerns within an historical context.

Readings of Plath which relate to a shared experience, to the recognition of the centrally feminist issues of her writing, to the ambiguous and difficult relation towards self and identity, are found through the filter of fiction. Popular feminist texts of the 1970s, such as Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* and Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*, interact with the context of Plath's writing; the novels move through female histories that position the 1950s as a time out of which to progress and develop. The employment of the figure of Plath ranges from the oblique, the parodying of the popular

cheerleader in *Kinflicks*; the imagistic, the similarity in expression and allusion found in *The Women's Room*; and the referential: Plath as writer and icon is an integral part of *Fear Of Flying*. It seems particularly relevant to consider these texts in relation to Plath since they contain the generation of writers, following the restrictive 1950s, who engage with the issues of Plath's work, continuing to articulate a particularly female experience. Although writing a decade later than Plath, the fictions consistently reveal an involvement with this legacy; contain a recourse to the time of femininity fever. This can be illustrated by a consideration of the way in which these writers reflect on the ethos of women's magazines, revealing an engagement which differs from the complexity and ambivalence found in Plath.

Women's writing and criticism during the 1970s introduce a feminist understanding of this commercial market, and women's magazines become ripe for rejection: a degree of blame is placed on them for their central role in positioning and influencing women into narrow definitions.

'So I went out and bought *The Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*. I did it for years religiously. I read them like the Bible, trying to find out how to be a woman.'
(French 1983:17)

This is the voice of Martha in Marilyn French's novel *The Women's Room* describing her dependence on and belief in the authority of women's magazines to shape and define the woman: the image industry is received with a reverence usually

reserved for a holy text, so strong is its power of manipulation and persuasion. French's novel, steeped in 1970s feminism, dissects the era prior to its creation. Through the disclosure of the chaos behind the novel's suburban dreams, French reveals the attempt at fostering a magazine lifestyle to be a sham governed by narrow conceptions of gender. The novel releases the characters from this state of coercive subjection into a fuller realization of their capacities and ambitions, into a world outwith the boundaries of the glossies.

Isadora Wing in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* is able to ridicule the era through women's magazines. Isadora's reevaluation of the boundaries of women's shared experience enables her to criticize the whole spectrum of women's magazines and easily identify their image type, from 1950s passivity to 1970s assertion:

I suddenly had a passion to *be* that ordinary girl. To be that good little housewife, that glorified American mother, that mascot from *Mademoiselle*, that matron from *McCall's*, that cutie from *Cosmo*, that girl with the Good Housekeeping Seal tattooed on her ass and advertising jingles programmed in her brain. (1978:230)

These writers reveal themselves to be part of Plath's contextual imagination yet able to progress to a feminist awareness that can criticize and offer a critique of the female role which Plath's work struggles with. By recognizing an historical position and context from which to interpret Plath's writing, the novelists reclaim Plath from an isolated, extreme

position. Perhaps most centrally, they deny the construction of a mythical Plath by resisting the presentation of an archetypal woman.

Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks*, published in 1976, actively combines the past and the present, interlocking the narratives of Ginny Babcock's first-person reflection on her life with the authorial narrative of Ginny visiting her dying mother. The novel begins with a cheerleading Ginny, superficially socially acceptable, but privately subversive, moving through her incarnations of other social and sexual selves. Ginny is mockingly yet lovingly portrayed as 'that mascot from *Mademoiselle*' (Jong 1978:230):

When we reached our parking spot, Joe Bob turned to me in the dark and said softly, 'Ginny, will you wear my class ring?'

Would I wear his ring? Would Elizabeth Taylor wear the Hope diamond? Oh yes, Joe Bob, *yes!* (1986:55)

It is the exploration of the teenage Ginny which provides a reflection onto Plath's writing; mirroring the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s. Alther's text reveals the contradictions between social and private self, the difficulty of assimilating the two, the prevailing division of a female self. Appearing to be the epitome of the *Seventeen* girl since she is their average, popular reader; a cheerleader dating the sports star; Ginny embodies the attainment of teenage magazines' success. Yet, through a sexual expression, she reveals what is between the lines of *Seventeen*'s date tips. The relation to Plath

is oblique, more a reflection than an interaction, yet it is a text which relates to the pressures found in Plath's writing.

Ginny's narrative explores reinterpretations of the self, creating a strong sense of gendered transformation and redefinition; exploring the continuing difficulty of expressing a self through a social persona. Ginny is persistently struggling for the expression of an authentic self, but is restricted by the need to identify and interpret her self through cultural images. Although *Kinflicks* develops through a vocally feminist era, it remains aware of the difficulties of expression of the female image. These issues of identity and selfhood which lie at the heart of *Kinflicks*, reveal a connection between the contemporary woman and a need to interpret the past; the development of a feminist consciousness out of the era of femininity fever.

The title of the opening chapter, which situates Ginny as her teenage self, is 'The Art of Dying Well', surely an echo of 'Lady Lazarus': 'Dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well.' The narrative begins with an ironic tone, satirizing the reality and fear of death in Ginny's family and society:

When the Major emerged from his casts, a metamorphosis had occurred: He was no longer bold and brash. In fact, the first project he undertook was to renovate the basement family room into a bomb shelter as a surprise for Mother's birthday. Her reaction to the atmospheric nuclear tests going on all over the world then was to join a group in Hullsport called Mother's Organization for Peace. MOP meetings consisted of a handful of women with abrasive

Yankee accents who sipped tea and twisted handkerchief corners and insisted bravely that Russian mothers *must* feel the same about strontium 90 in *their* babies' bones. (1986:8-9)

The actions of measured protest or enthusiastic protection, a resistance or acceptance of the bomb, is reflected in the responses of Ginny's parents. The tension of this era is depicted, particularly through the female experience; the mother's reaction to the bomb is from a maternal perspective. The first-person narrative is slightly ironic in its relation of this peculiar era, a tone which reveals an awareness and detachment from the previously immediate pressures. At the same time, however, a reference to Plath at the opening, a sarcasm reflecting Plath's own writing, suggests a degree of involvement in the narrative. *Kinflicks* acknowledges the situating of Plath within this era, within a shared narrative of a female consciousness and context. Although it does not offer a detailed association with Plath, Alther's examination of the shallowness of the era, the continual difficulty in finding an expression for the self, relates to issues explored in previous chapters: the strained relationship between Plath's writing and the interpretation of women through popular culture. Alther condenses the pressures and strictures of the 1950s into entertainment; but it is an enjoyment which relies on an awareness or experience of the actual pressures.

Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* is a more consciously political novel than *Kinflicks*. Moving through the 1950s to the 1970s, *The Women's Room* offers a personal and political understanding of the lives of a group of women. The use of the

1950s as an era and a reference point is polemical: it is remembered from a highly critical perspective; the central narrative of Mira touches on the social and cultural pressures placed on women, encapsulating issues of ownership and identity. Towards the end of the novel, Clarissa recalls her dream of a surreal wedding:

He is modelling a manikin/corpse of me, paying much attention to small details - the texture of my skin, the different colors of my hair. The doll he creates can walk, blink her eyelashes, and do whatever is demanded of a bride in a wedding. Somehow it is decided that the bride/corpse/manikin will go through the ceremony instead of me. The audience will think it is me, and I will be able to escape the ceremony. The undertaker is also making an intricately carved bed/coffin which is to be placed on the altar. At the end of the ceremony, the couple will lie down on the bed/coffin as the audience watches.

'The whole thing happens - the wedding, the lying down. But meantime, Duke and I run off to New York together. We aren't even missed.'

"It can sew, it can cook, it can talk, talk, talk," Iso quoted. 'But you do escape, you and Duke.' (1983:597)

After Clarissa's grotesque dream, Iso pertinently quotes from Plath's poem 'The Applicant', accurately connecting the fantastical images of the substitution of self with tensions found in Plath's poem. Although *The Women's Room* is situated within a more liberated era, and Clarissa sees herself as escaping from

the role of subservient wife, it is still a period of transition. The insistence on doll-like woman, and the pressures from society to achieve this, remain relevant. The connection to Plath reveals French to be engaging with the ideas of Plath's writing; the images of the poetry becoming imbued with a feminist consciousness. Plath is placed in a context and is encouraged to be understood within a feminist framework. The issues of Plath's poetry are still seen to be about the difficulty of expression, about creating a self, but it is a move away from a mythic, escapist interpretation, and begins to focus on understanding these ideas within society and culture. French includes the fears found in Plath's writing within a gendered narrative: Plath is reinvented as a focus point for female experience through an engagement primarily with her writing, rather than her life.

The opening section of *The Women's Room* is situated in the 1950's, exploring the suburban tensions of wives and mothers. French creates the stifling atmosphere, the enforced subservience and the difficulties of defining a self identity through a gripping fictional narrative. Meyersville, the suburban dream of America, is described as:

[...] a ghetto of sorts, in a world made up of small enclaves designed to isolate classes and colors, the aged and the infirm, from each other. It contained a large number of identical small houses, each with its own refrigerator and stove and washing machine and fenced ward. (1983:94-95)

This is the world of the women's fantasies, an ideal of the 1950s which French is able to articulate as a repressive, restricted realm. The utopia of kitchen modernization is now figured as a ghetto, an area of isolation and containment. French begins to fictionalize and politically understand a landscape which Plath confronts and battles with in her poetry. When French then later contextualizes Plath's writing within the narratives of women's lives, she offers an understanding of Plath which acknowledges a contextual and feminist interpretation of her writing.

As Plath's work becomes part of a feminist discourse in fiction, the struggles found in her writing are being reinterpreted and confronted. Since writers of the 1970s were eager to contextualize women's position through history, a special relationship exists with the 1950s, an era which can be seen to determine the discourse of contemporary feminism. Within Mira's suburban incarnation, brimming with aspirations, the tensions of identity and self are revealed:

She was living the American Dream, she knew that, and
she tried to get her mask on straight. (1983:196)

The image of the social self as a mask obviously did not begin with Plath's 'In Plaster'. However, the contextualization within which the image appears in Plath's writing provides a dimension for *The Women's Room*. Plath's placement as a reference point, as an interpreter of this women's realm, reveals her significance in the exploration of women's lives. The context of this mask-

making filters directly into the images of Plath's writing previously discussed, reflecting onto an emerging feminist ethos.

Another central way in which Plath's writing can be detected in this form of revisionist fiction is the mode of expression concerned with gender roles and positioning in *The Women's Room*. The omniscient narrational voice, the identity of which remains uncertain until the ending of the novel, discusses the treatment of women in society by men:

Well, answers I leave to others, to a newer generation perhaps, lacking the deformities mine suffered. My feelings about men are the result of my experience. I have little sympathy for them. Like a Jew just released from Dachau, I watch the handsome young Nazi soldier fall writhing to the ground with a bullet in his stomach and I look briefly and walk on. I don't even need to shrug. I simply don't care. What he was, as a person, I mean, what his shames and yearnings were, simply don't matter. It is too late for me to care. Once upon a time I could have cared.

But fairyland is back beyond the door. Forever and forever I will hate Nazis, even if you can prove to me that they too were victims, that they were subject to illusion, brainwashed with images. (1983: 267-68)

An analogy is drawn between the power structures and abuses of the holocaust, and the relationships between men and women. Sufficient expression for a feminist perspective is discovered in a resort to history; a comparison between the victim position of

women and Jews. Within this narrative, the 'deformities' of women are results of the repressive 1950s, the treatment of women by society in this era. Later in the novel, the comparison is again drawn in relation to Val, and the shock of her appearance after her daughter has been raped:

I saw Val around that time and what struck me were her eyes. I have seen eyes like that since: they were staring at me out of the head of a Polish Jew who had spent her young adulthood in a concentration camp. The causes hardly seem parallel, but perhaps they were not so dissimilar. (1983: 557)

The parallel drawn between the disturbed eyes of Val and the Polish Jew is qualified by the final sentence. French is ambiguous about the appropriateness of the comparison, hence perhaps her nervous reiteration of a metaphor that she does not wholly justify. The individual persecution of women in society is aligned to the central persecution of the twentieth century. Plath's writing which approaches the holocaust, centrally 'Daddy', is adopted in the 1970s as a radical feminist text which incorporated a gender debate. *The Women's Room* can be seen to be adapting this reading, employing a parallel between the central figures. French reinterprets the relationships in Plath's poetry into a modern understanding of feminism as the extremity of Plath's poetry is transfigured into modern sexual politics, reinterpreting a consciousness which Plath could not write within.

The Women's Room presents an imagistic interpretation of Plath. 'The Applicant' is the only poem quoted in the novel, placing Plath as a centrally important writer, and communicating her work to be part of shaping the modern feminist consciousness. By revealing an awareness of Plath's poetry, the images and allusions of the narrative reflect on to the discourse of her writing. *The Women's Room*, while presenting through fiction the reconstruction of women's identities and consciousness, incorporates a reconstruction of Plath's writing within this dialogue.

These writers can be seen to be reinterpreting the meaning of Plath's writing within a contextual framework. The poetry is reclaimed from a literary critical focus and a biographical focus, to be understood in relation to women's lives. Although this adoption of Plath generated another force of mythologizing as Plath became a martyr figure for sections of the feminist movement, these narratives appear to return Plath to a shared context. The presence of the 1950s and the struggles of a generation before modern feminism, relates to Plath's writing.

Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* reveals an awareness of Plath's writing which becomes integral to the dimensions of plot, character and narrative. It is a central text in examining the reconstruction of Plath from narratives concerned with her generation, attempting an interpretation and understanding of women's past incarnations. Examining the relevance of Plath to the novel *Fear of Flying* offers an understanding of these interpretations of Plath, attempting to reclaim her writing and iconic status from the psychologizing and mythologizing of literary criticism.

Published in 1974, *Fear of Flying* offers a case study in the history of women's writing. It was originally marketed as an antipathy to concerned, serious women's writing:

One has to go back to *Lolita* to find an odyssey of misadventurous love-and-sex affairs as funny and sad, as witty and inventive, and as true as this. (Jong 1978)

Fear of Flying [...] stands as a notably luxuriant and glowing bloom in the sometimes thistly garden of 'raised' feminine consciousness. (Jong 1978)

These reviews, by Elizabeth Janeway and John Updike respectively, were used in the publishing blitz of the 1970s to sell the novel, inadvertently illustrating the way in which Jong's novel consequently fell out of favour, becoming no more than a reference point for a promiscuous yet naive 1970s attitude. Yet *Fear of Flying*, once considered within the context of other central female texts, can be reevaluated as a fiction not cultivated outside a 'thistly garden' of feminism but as one which interacts with the conflicts of what this means and admits its own ambiguous successes through a dialogue with a masculine tradition and with a feminine subtradition and presence, disclosing a special relationship with Sylvia Plath.

Plath and her writing permeate many levels of Jong's novel: she is present as a literary foremother; her poetry and fiction interfere with the narrative; she is an undercurrent which is denied but always present. Sylvia Plath, as a woman and as a

writer, is frequently invoked within the text, described as part of a predictable coterie:

Where were the women who were *really* free, who didn't spend their lives bouncing from man to man, who felt complete with or without a man? We looked to our uncertain heroines for help, and lo and behold - Simone de Beauvoir never makes a move without wondering *what would Sartre think?* And Lillian Hellman wants to be as much of a man as Dashiell Hammett so he'll love her like he loves himself. And Doris Lessing's Anna Wulf can't come unless she's in love, which is seldom. And the rest - the women writers, the women painters - most of them were shy, shrinking, schizoid. Timid in their lives and brave only in their art. Emily Dickinson, the Brontës, Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers ... Flannery O'Connor raising peacocks and living with her mother. Sylvia Plath sticking her head into an oven of myth. Georgia O'Keefe alone in the desert, apparently a survivor. What a group! Severe, suicidal, strange. [...] Almost all the women we admired most were spinsters or suicides. Was *that* where it all led? (1978:97-98)

This list of women artists presents the various fatalities of creative expression: the women who are dominated by their partners; the women who allowed their lives to overcome and determine their art; the loveless spinsters. Plath is reduced, along with the other women, to the motif for which they are

most popularly remembered; the frozen image of Plath on her knees.

Isadora's ability to laugh at and mock the female writers who were becoming martyrs of feminism is a relief from the mythology that has been generated. But for all Isadora's talk of rejection and her ridiculing of these writers, though noticeably not their work but their lives, Jong's narrative is contradictory. In contrast to this tirade of disappointment, Isadora also admits the attraction of Plath:

Like when my analyst had never heard of Sylvia Plath.
There I was for days talking about her suicide and how I
wanted to write great poetry and put my head in the oven.
All the while he was probably thinking of frozen coffee
cake. (1978: 84)

This treatment of Plath is mocking Isadora's adoration and simplicity as much as the imagined futility of Plath's life. The desire to emulate Plath also places Isadora outside the reference of the analyst. Kate Millett's *The Loony Bin Trip*, a novel written in a vastly different tone from *Fear of Flying*, still contains the obligatory Plath reference:

Janis and Plath and Sexton beckoned; it seemed the time to
bow out as a writer too; the residual effects of suicide on
artistic reputation might cover the fact that I had nothing
else to write. (1991:75)

These three women, like three witches, are imagined as beckoning and tempting to a creative death, becoming imaginary fantasy figures through the effects of their suicides. As with *Fear of Flying*, Plath's suicide is the act through which she is remembered and interpreted, and this incident is enlisted to construct the narratives of Millett's and Jong's characters. *Fear of Flying*'s direct references to Plath deposit her as an example of a type of woman, used as shorthand for the struggling housewife, the youthful suicide, the glamorously failed have-it-all. If anything Plath is presented as a warning rather than an option, a narrative which is now to be avoided.

While the mythical Plath which has evolved after her death is rejected, the cultural significance of Plath is contained both structurally and thematically, presenting a reinvention of Plath, although often an unpredictable and uncomfortable one. Isadora recognizes the contradictions and difficulties of actually being a committed feminist and employs Plath to illustrate her point: "Every woman adores a fascist," as Sylvia Plath says. I feel guilty for writing poems when I should be cooking' (1978:124). Although Isadora relates her problem ironically, it contains a similar reading of 'Daddy', a suggestion that Plath's play on feminine submission deserves an ironic and parodic interpretation. As Isadora's use of Plath is seen more as a subtle reflection and less of a comic rejection, the novel displays an understanding of the ambiguities in Plath; permeating Isadora's narrative as a literary figure, Plath's status as fiction and myth explores the boundaries between the relation and interpretation of a text or a life.

Jong's novel, by rewriting and reinterpreting the themes and concerns of the 1950s, the historical context of much of Plath's work, positions itself as a cultural text. Isadora remembers the fifties in terms of its cultural significances and referents:

I would be diabolically interrogated by crew-cut FBI agents until I confessed that my parents were communist (they had been communists once in fact) and we would all end our days like the Rosenbergs singing 'God Bless America' in our damp cells and anticipating what it would be like to be electrocuted. (1978:81)

Isadora's distance allows her to reflect sardonically upon a recognizable past. Although both Plath and Jong use hyperbolic cinematic images in their writing, while Jong can sarcastically reinterpret the era from a distance, Plath places Esther within the era where she does spend her time 'wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves' (1980:1).

Isadora's reconstruction of the fifties is an echo of the factors contributing towards the feeling of paranoia found in Plath's writing:

It was civilized 1955, only a decade or so since the Nazi holocaust; it was the era of atomic testing and stockpiling; it was two years after the Korean War, and only shortly after the height of the communist witchhunts, [...] And Uncle Sam, who made so many things tax deductible, had just two years ago electrocuted the Rosenbergs in the name of civilization. (1978:253)

This is the era of Plath's narratives reinterpreted: the stresses Isadora recollects are articulated in Plath's texts, especially the sardonic, politically critical voice which is found in her journals. *Fear of Flying*'s introduction of Plath's poetry as a chapter heading and the concern with the relationship between Isadora's life and society, ensures the continuing reverberation throughout the novel of Plath's life and work. Chapter Two is titled 'Every Woman Adores a Fascist' and begins by quoting the lines of Plath's poem 'Daddy': 'Every woman adores a Fascist,/ The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you.' There are similar feelings of ambivalence to be found in 'Daddy' as there are in Isadora's thoughts on Germany:

But I was born in 1942 and if my parents had been German - not American - Jews, I would have been born (and probably would have died) in a concentration camp - despite my blond hair, blue eyes and Polish peasant nose. I could never forget that either. Germany was like a stepmother: utterly familiar, utterly despised. More despised, in fact, for being so familiar. (1978:27)

These feelings of confused familiarity and detestation in Jong, echo Plath's poem 'Daddy', expressing the confusion between desire and revulsion. Isadora explores this relationship and her status as an American Jew by borrowing from the rhetoric and imagination of Plath; Germany thus becomes a fantasy and an emblem.

One of the central unofficial legislators of women's lives in the 1950s, psychiatry, is rewritten through the 1970s idiom and understanding of Isadora. *Fear of Flying* deflates the previous acceptance of psychiatric control by portraying the jargon of psychiatric theorizing in a jaded, sophisticated, aware voice:

But your shrink insists that it's Daddy you really *want*. So why is having him unthinkable? Maybe you *should* blow Daddy and be done with it? Maybe that's the only way to overcome the fear? (1978:222)

Isadora is so familiar with psychiatric theory that her sexuality is casually interpreted with reference to Oedipus, Electra and the Plathian Daddy, stalwarts of popular theorizing. As Isadora translates much of life into sexual terms, the ambivalence of the daughter towards the father is merely encapsulated within her view of herself as a woman, and ironically negotiated as merely a source of amusement. Plath's work, and even her life, appears to be governed by a belief in an American interpretation of Freudian analysis, which positions the woman around a language of lack. Jong reverses and deflates this fear in a way Plath, within the confines of her era, could not. When Isadora says: 'I was left to sort out my dilemma by myself. No good Daddy to rescue me this time.' (1978:158) the Daddy is not an actual father but a signifier of Freudian readings, which Isadora's narrative demonstrates to have become redundant. The recognition of a relationship between Plath's cultural history and the stresses of her writing, reinterprets the traumas of her work from a solipsistic into a cultural sphere.

The presence of Plath and her narrative structures within *Fear of Flying* reveals a rescripting of her work within a modern consciousness. Plath is figured in the production of other narratives; her texts are employed in the understanding and construction of the modern female identity. The novelists of the 1970s are engaged in a reconstruction of Plath and her work which moves away from a mythologizing or psychoanalytic interpretation towards an understanding which develops from a contextual awareness and empathy. The fictions of these novelists foreshadows much of the critical studies engaging with Plath, a continually emerging movement away from the biographical fixation.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Published Works by Sylvia Plath

(1965) *Ariel*, London: Faber

(1968) *Three Women: A Monologue for Three Voices*, London: Turret

(1970) *Wreath for a Bridal*, Surrey: Sceptre

(1971) *Winter Trees*, London: Faber

(1975) *Letters Home*, London: Faber

(1980) *The Bell Jar* 1963, London: Faber

(1986) *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings* 1977, London: Faber

(1987) *The Colossus* 1960, London: Faber

(1987) *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* 1982, New York: Ballantine

(1988) *Collected Poems* 1981, London: Faber

(1991) *Crossing the Water* 1971, London: Faber

Manuscript Collections

Sylvia Plath Collection,
Ruth Mortimer Rare Book Room,
Smith College,
Northampton, Massachusetts

Sylvia Plath Manuscript Collection,
Neilson Rare Book Room,
Lilly Library,
Indiana University,
Bloomington, Indiana

Secondary Sources

Abel, E. and M. Hirsch, E. Langland. (1983) *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, Hanover; London: UP of New England

Adburgham, A. (1972) *Women in Print: Writing Women and Women's Magazines From the Restoration to the Accession of Victoria*, London: Allen

Aird, E. (1975) *Sylvia Plath: Her Life and Work 1973*, New York; London: Harper

Alexander, P., ed. (1985) *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath*, New York: Harper

----- (1991) *Rough Magic: Sylvia Plath*, New York: Penguin

Alther, L. (1986) *Kinflicks* 1976, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Alvarez, A. (1972) *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* 1971, London: Redwood

Ambrose, S. E., rev. (1976) *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy 1938-1970* 1971, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Anderson, L. (1997) *Women and Autobiography in the Twentieth Century: Remembered Futures*, Hertfordshire: Hall/Harvester

Argyle, M. and Cook, M. (1976) *Gaze and Mutual Gaze*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP

Atwood, M. (1990) *The Handmaid's Tale* 1986, London: Virago

----- (1991) *Cat's Eye* 1989, London: Virago

Axelrod, S. G. (1984) 'Plath's Literary Relations: An Essay and an Index to the *Journals* and *Letters Home*', *Resources for American Literary Study*, Spring 14:1-2, pp. 59-84

----- (1990) *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP

Ballaster, R. and M. Beetham, E. Frazer, S. Hebron. (1991)
Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine, London: Macmillan

Banks, L. R. (1962) *The L-Shaped Room* 1960, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Barnard, C. K. (1978) *Sylvia Plath*, Boston: Twayne

Barnet, R. J. (1984) *Allies: America, Europe, Japan Since the War* 1983, London: Cape

Bassein, B. A. (1984) *Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature*, Westport, Conn.; London: Greenwood

Bassnett, S. (1987) *Sylvia Plath*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Batchelor, J., ed. (1995) *The Art of Literary Biography*, Oxford: Clarendon

Baym, N. (1992) *Feminism and American Literary History*, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP

Bedient, C. (1979) 'Sylvia Plath, romantic...', *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. G. Lane, Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins UP, pp. 3-18

----- (1985) 'Oh, Plath!', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*,
Spring-Winter 12-13:2-1, pp. 275-281

Bell, Q. (1976) *Virginia Woolf*, vol. II: *Mrs Woolf 1912-1941*
1972, St. Albans: Triad-Paladin

Benstock, S., ed. (1988) *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of*
Women's Autobiographical Writings, London: Routledge

Bernard, A. (1993) 'My Plath Problem', *Parnassus: Poetry in*
Review, 18:2, pp. 340-357

Bernstein, B. J., ed. (1970) *Towards a New Past: Dissenting*
Essays in American History 1968, London: Chatto

Biskind, P. (1983) *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught*
Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties, London: Pluto

Bloom, H., ed. (1989) *Sylvia Plath: Modern Critical Views*,
Philadelphia; New York: Chelsea

Boyer, P. (1985) *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and*
Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age, New York: Pantheon

Brands, H. W. (1993) *The Devil We Knew: Americans and the*
Cold War, New York; Oxford: Oxford UP

Bredsdorff, T. (1989) 'The Biographical Pursuit. Biography as a Tool of Literary Criticism: Sylvia Plath - a test case', *Orbis Litterarum*, 44, pp. 181-190

Breines, W. (1992) *Young, White and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties*, Boston: Beacon

Bronfen, E. (1992) *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Manchester: Manchester UP

Brown, J. A. C. (1961) *Freud and the Post-Freudians*, Harmondsworth: Pelican-Penguin

Bruss, E. W. (1976) *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*, Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins UP

Buckley, J. H. (1984) *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard UP

Butler, J. and J. W. Scott, eds. (1992) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York; London: Routledge

Butscher, E. (1976) *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, New York: Seabury

----- ed. (1979) *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* 1977, London: Owen

----- (1990) 'Unfinished Lives of Sylvia Plath', *The Georgia Review*, Spring/Summer 44, pp. 294-300

Cam, H. (1987) "'Daddy': Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton", *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, 59:3, pp. 429-432

Carr, R. K. (1952) *The House Committee on Un-American Activities 1945-50*, New York: Cornell UP

Carter, A. (1992) *Nothing Sacred* 1982, London: Virago

Celan, P. (1988) *Selected Poems*, trans. M. Hamburger, London: Anvil

Chisholm, A. (1985) *Faces of Hiroshima*, London: Cape

Conrad, P. and Schneider, J. W. (1980) *Deviance and Medicalization: From Badness to Sickness*, St Louis; London: Mosby

Couzyn, J. (1985) 'Sylvia Plath', *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, pp. 144-148

Coward, R. (1984.) *Female Desire*, London: Paladin

Coyle, S. (1984) 'Images of Madness and Retrieval: An Exploration of Metaphor in *The Bell Jar*', *Studies in American Fiction*, 12:2, pp. 161-174

Crofts, C. (1995) "'The Peanut-Crunching Crowd" in the Work of Sylvia Plath: Holocaust as Spectacle?', *ManuScript*, 1:1, pp 49-61

Culbertson, R. (1995) 'Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self', *New Literary History*, 26, pp. 169-195

Curran, V. and S. Golombok. (1985) *Bottling It Up*, London: Faber

Daly, M. (1979) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism* 1978, London: Women's Press

Dawson, J. (1966) *The Ha-Ha* 1961, London: Panther

Dickie, M. (1982) 'Sylvia Plath's Narrative Strategies', *The Iowa Review*, Spring 13:2, pp. 1-14

Dreyer, E. (1993) 'Review of Zelda Fitzgerald, *The Collected Writing*', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 22:3, pp. 327-30

Drucker, T. (1992) 'Desperately Seeking Sylvia: Psychiatry in the Life and Work of Sylvia Plath', *Academy Forum*, Winter 36:4, pp. 16-18

Dutta, U. (1981) 'Poetry as Performance: A Reading of Sylvia Plath', *The Literary Criterion*, 16:3, pp. 1-11

Easthope, A. (1983) *Poetry as Discourse*, London: Methuen

----- (1994) 'Reading the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *English*, 43:117, pp. 223-235

Edel, L. (1957) *Literary Biography*, London: Hart-Davis

Eagleton, T. (1976) *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*, London: NBL

Eisler, B. (1986) *Private Lives: Men and Women of the Fifties*, New York; London: Franklin

Ellsberg, P. and E. Melamed. (1989) 'Seeing Through the Emperor's New Clothes: Two Women Look at the Nuclear Issue' *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies*, ed. D. E. Russell, New York: Pergamon, pp. 84-92

Ewan, S. and E. Ewan. (1982) *Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness*, New York: McGraw

Farmer, F. (1972) *Will There Really Be a Morning?*, London: Allison

Fenton, J. (1997) 'Lady Lazarus', *The New York Review of Books*, May 29, pp.12-16

Ferguson, M. (1983) *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity*, London: Heinemann

Fiedler, L. (1955) 'Afterthoughts on the Rosenbergs' *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics*, Boston: Beacon, pp. 25-45

Fitzgerald, Z. (1993) *The Collected Writings* 1991, London: Abacus

Fowler, B. (1991) *The Alienated Reader: Women and Popular Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century*, New York; London: Harvester

French, M. (1983) *The Women's Room* 1978, London: Sphere

Friedan, B. (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, London: Gollancz

Friedlander, S., ed. (1992) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard UP

Fromm, H. (1990) 'Sylvia Plath, Hunger Artist', *The Hudson Review*, Summer 43:2, pp. 245-256

Furnas, J. C. and the staff of the *Ladies Home Journal* (1943) *How America Lives*, London: Bodley Head

Gardner, P. (1980-81) "'The Bland Granta': Sylvia Plath at Cambridge", *The Dalhousie Review*, 60:3, pp. 496-507

Gavron, H. (1968) *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* 1966, Harmondsworth: Pelican-Penguin

Gilbert, S. M. (1979) 'A Fine, White Flying Myth: The Life and Work of Sylvia Plath', *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, Bloomington: Indiana UP

----- (1983) 'Teaching Plath's "Daddy" to Speak to Undergraduates', *ADE Bulletin*, Winter, pp. 38-42

Goffman, E. (1980) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959, Harmondsworth: Pelican-Penguin

Goldman, E. F. (1975) *The Crucial Decade - and after: America, 1945-1960*, New York: Knopf

Goldstein, A. H. (1975) N. pag. *The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*, New York: Hill

Gray, R. (1991) *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* 1990, New York; London: Longman

Greene, G. and C. Kahn, eds. (1985) *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, London: Methuen

Grosz, E. (1990) 'Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity', *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, ed. S. Gunew, New York; London: Routledge

Hall, S., ed. (1980) *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, London: Hutchinson

Hamilton, I. (1987) 'The Tatty Wreckage of her Life', *The New York Times Book Review*, October 25, pp. 12-13

----- (1989) *In Search of J. D. Salinger* 1988, London: Minerva

Hardwick, E. (1974) *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*, London: Weidenfeld

Harris, N. (1987) 'New Life in American Poetry: The Child as Mother of the Poet', *The Centennial Review*, 31:3, pp. 240-254

Hayman, R. (1991) *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*, London: Heinemann

Hayman, R. (1992) *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* 1991, London: Minerva

Heilbrun, C. G. (1989) *Writing a Woman's Life* 1988, London: Women's Press

Heron, L., ed. (1988) *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* 1985, London: Virago

Hillman, B. (1990) 'Plath's Hair', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Fall 29, pp. 649-50

Holbrook, D. (1988) *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* 1976, London: Athlone

Hoover, E. J. (1958) *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America*, London: Dent

Horne, D. A. (1990) *The Role of the Journal in the Creative Writing Process of Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Smart and Sylvia Plath*, unpub. Ph D: University of Toronto

----- (1992) 'Biography in Disguise: Sylvia Plath's Journals', *Wascana Review*, 27:1, pp.90-104

Hughes, O. (1990) 'The Plath Myth and the Reviewing of *Bitter Fame*', *Poetry Review*, 80:3, pp.61-63

Hughes, T. (1982) 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', *Grand Street*, Spring 13, pp. 86-99

----- (1988) Notes. *Collected Poems 1981*, by S. Plath, London: Faber, pp. 275-296

----- (1994) 'On Sylvia Plath', *Raritan*, Fall XVI:2, pp.1-10

Hull, V. (1958) *The Monkey Puzzle*, London: Barrie

Inglis, F. (1992) *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life in the Cold War*, London: Aurum

Jaidra, M. (1984) 'Sentimental Violence: A Note on Diane Wakoski and Sylvia Plath', *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 14:5, p 2

Jelinek, E., ed. (1980) *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Bloomington; London: Indiana UP

Jong, E. (1978) *Fear of Flying* 1974, London: Panther

----- (1994) 'Forever Jong', *The Scotsman*, May 30, p. 7

Kamel, R. (1981) "'Reach Hag Hands and Haul Me In': Matrophobia in the Letters of Sylvia Plath', *Northwest Review*, 19:2-1, pp. 198-208

Kant, K. M. (1993) 'The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Contemporary Literature*, 34:4, pp. 620-669

Keller, W. W. (1989) *The Liberals and J Edgar Hoover: Rise and Fall of a Domestic Intelligence State*, Princeton: Princeton UP

King, F. (1992) 'The Other Plath', *The American Spectator*, January 25, pp 52-54

Kirkham, P. and J. Thumim, eds. (1993) *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men*, London: Laurence

Kleinschmidt, E. (1988) 'Shed, Unfinished Lives: Plath and Keats', *The Centennial Review*, 32:3, pp. 279-285

Kolich, A. M. (1983) 'Does Fiction Have to be Made Better than Life?', *Modern Fiction Studies*, Summer 29:2, pp. 159-174

Kristeva, J. (1980) 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. L. S. Roudiez, trans. T. Gora, A Jardine, L. S. Roudiez, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 64-91

Kroll, J. (1978) *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* 1976, New York; London: Harper

Krook, D. (1976) 'Recollections of Sylvia Plath', *Critical Quarterly*, Winter 18:4, pp. 5-14

Lane, G., ed. (1979) *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins UP

Lang, B., ed. (1988) *Writing and the Holocaust*, New York; London: Holmer

Langer, L. L. (1975) *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, New Haven; London: Yale UP

Lasch, C. (1970) 'The Cultural Cold War: A Short History of the Congress for Cultural Freedom', *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* 1968, London: Chatto, pp. 332-359

Lee, H. (1991) Introduction. *Three Guineas* 1938 by V. Woolf, London: Hogarth, pp. vii-xviii

Leonard, G. M. (1987-88) 'The Necessary Strategy of Renunciation: The Triumph of Emily Dickinson and the Fall of Sylvia Plath', *University of Dayton Review*, Winter 19:1, pp. 79-90

----- (1992) "'The Woman is Perfected. Her Dead Body Wears the Smile of Accomplishment": Sylvia Plath and *Mademoiselle Magazine*', *College Literature*, 19:2, pp. 60-82

McCarthy, M. (1989) *The Group* 1963, London: Weidenfeld

McCracken, E. (1993) *Decoding Women's Magazines From Mademoiselle to Ms.*, New York: St Martin's

MacIver, R. M., ed. (1961) *Dilemmas of Youth in America Today*, New York: Harper

MacPherson, P. (1991) *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*, London: Routledge

McRobbie, A. (1991) *Feminism and Youth Culture: From Jackie to Just Seventeen*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

McWilliams, C. (1950) *Witch Hunt: The Revival of Heresy*, Boston: Little

Malcolm, J. (1995) *The Silent Woman: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* 1993, London: Papermac-Macmillan

Margolis, M. (1984) *Mothers and Such: Views of American Women and Why They Changed*, Berkeley; London: U of California P

Markey, J. (1993) *A Journey Into the Red Eye: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath - a critique*, London: Women's Press

Marsack, R. (1992) *Sylvia Plath*, Buckingham: Open UP

Martin, E. (1981) 'Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in *The Bell Jar* and *Les Mots Pour Le Dire*', *The French-American Review*, 5:1, pp 24-47

Martin, R. A. (1991) 'Esther's Dilemma in *The Bell Jar*', *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 21:1, pp. 6-8

Mathews, G. (1987) *'Just a Housewife': The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*, New York: Oxford UP

Mazzaro, J. (1979) 'Sylvia Plath and the cycles of history' *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. G. Lane, Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins UP, pp. 218-240

Mead, M. (1977) *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* 1949, Westpoint, Conn.: Greenwood

Meeropol, R. and M. Meeropol. (1975) *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg*, Boston: Houghton

Melander, I. (1972) *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes*, Stockholm: Almquist

Messmer, M. W. (1988) '"Thinking It Through Completely": The Interpretation of Nuclear Culture', *Centennial Review*, 32:4, pp. 397-413

Milford, N. (1985) *Zelda Fitzgerald 1970*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Miller, D. T. and M. Nowak. (1977) *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, New York: Doubleday

Millett, K. (1991) *The Loony Bin Trip* 1990, London: Virago

Millum, T. (1975) *Images of Women: Advertising in Women's Magazines*, London: Chatto

Mitchell, J. (1979) *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* 1974, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Mitford, J. (1969) *The Trial of Dr. Spock, The Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr., Michael Ferber, Mitchell Goodman and Marcus Raskin*, London: Macdonald

Moers, E. (1977) *Literary Women*, Princeton: Princeton UP

Moi, T. (1985) *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London: Methuen

Morris, C. (1982) 'Order and Chaos in Plath's *The Colossus*', *Concerning Poetry*, 15:2, pp. 33-42

Mortimer, P. (1987) *The Pumpkin Eater* 1962, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Mucuigan, C. (1989) 'The Legend of Sylvia Plath', *Newsweek*, August 28, p. 60

Mulvey, L. (1989) *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Basingstoke: Macmillan

Myers, G. (1994) *Word in Ads*, London: Arnold

Myers, K. (1986) *Understains: The Sense and Seduction of Advertising*, London: Comedia

Newman, C., ed. (1970) *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, London: Faber

Orr, P. (1966) 'Sylvia Plath', *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, London: Routledge, pp. 167-172

Ostriker, A. (1983) 'In Mind: The Divided Self and Women's Poetry', *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 24:4, pp. 351-365

Pagan, N. (1993) *Rethinking Literary Biography: A Postmodernist Approach to Tennessee Williams*, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP

Paterson, T. G., rev. (1992) *On Every Front: The Making and Unmaking of the Cold War* 1979, New York; London: Norton

Payne, K., ed. (1983) *Between Ourselves - Letters Between Mothers and Daughters 1750-1982*, London: Joseph

Perloff, M. (1985) 'Icon of the Fifties', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Spring-Winter 12-13:2-1, pp. 282-85

----- (1992) 'Book Review: *Rough Magic* by Paul Alexander and *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* by Jaqueline Rose', *The New England Quarterly*, 65, pp. 648-52

Philipson, I. (1988) *Ethel Rosenberg: Beyond the Myths*, New York: Watts

Plath, O. E. (1934) *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, New York: Macmillan

Pleasant, S. (1988) 'Sylvia Plath and Superman', *Pembroke Magazine*, 20, pp. 256-268

Poe, E. A. (1986) 'The Philosophy of Composition', *The Fall of the House of Usher and other writings* 1967, ed. D. Galloway, **London: Penguin**

Raman, R. (1993) *Consciousness in Conflict: An Analysis of the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, unpub. Ph D: University of Glasgow

Rich, A. (1979) 'Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson', in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, Bloomington: Indiana UP

----- (1981) *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* 1976, New York: Bantam

----- (1987) *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* 1986, London: Virago

Riesman, D. (1964) *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* 1950, New Haven; London: Yale UP

Rose, J. (1986) *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London: Verso

----- (1992) *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* 1991, London: Virago

----- (1995) 'Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture', *Critical Quarterly*, Spring 34:1, pp. 3-19

Rosenfeld, A. H. (1980) *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*, Bloomington; London: Indiana UP

Rosenthal, M. L. (1967) 'Other Confessional Poets: Sylvia Plath', *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II*, New York: Oxford University Press

Ross, A. (1989) *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*, New York; London: Routledge

Rudolf, A., ed. (1995) *Theme and Version: Plath and Ronsard*, London: Menard

Russell, D. E., ed. (1989) *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies*, New York: Pergamon

Sage, L. (1994) 'Surviving in the Wrong: Review of *The Silent Woman*', *Times Literary Supplement*, November 4, pp. 3-4

Sanazaro, L. (1981) 'Sylvia Plath and the Borestone Mountain Poetry Awards 1955-1963', *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 11:4, pp. 2-3

Sarot, E. (1987) "'Becoming More and More Historical": Sylvia Plath's "The Swarm"', *Concerning Poetry*, 20, pp. 41-56

Schaub, T. Hill. (1991) *American Fiction in the Cold War*, Madison: U of Wisconsin

Schemanske, M. G. (1992) *A Hex on the Cradle and Death in the Pot: A Kristevan Analysis of the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, unpub. Ph.D: University of Georgia

Showalter, E. (1993) *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* 1987, London: Virago

----- (1994) 'Going Underground', *The London Review of Books*, May 12, pp. 3, 5

Shuttle, P. and P. Redgrove. (1978) 'The Menstrous Traveller':
unpub. chapter, *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and
Everywoman*, pp. 1-64

----- (1986) *The Wise Wound: Menstruation and
Everywoman* 1978, London: Paladin

Simpson, L. (1979) *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg,
Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell*, London: Macmillan

Sinfield, A. (1989) *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar
Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell

Smith, Stan. (1982) *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth
Century Poetry*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan

Smith, Stevie. (1984) *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of
Stevie Smith* 1991, London: Virago

Smith, Sidonie. (1987) *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography:
Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*,
Bloomington: Indiana UP

Sontag, S. (1978) *Illness as Metaphor*, New York: Farrar

Spock, B. (1945) *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child
Care*, New York: Duell

----- 3rd rev. ed. (1979) *Baby and Child Care: completely updated and revised*, London: Bodley Head

Srivastava, A. K. (1981) 'The Intense Flame: Letters and Poems of Sylvia Plath', *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 11:1, pp. 71-81

Staton, S. F. (1982) 'The Great Divide: Gender in Sylvia Plath's Short Fiction', *Women and Literature*, 2:1, pp. 206-21

Steiner, N. H. (1974) *A Closer Look at Ariel: a memory of Sylvia Plath*, London: Faber

Stengel, E. (1964) *Suicide and Attempted Suicide*, Harmondsworth: Pelican-Penguin

Stevenson, Adlai. (1955) 'Women in a Free Society', *Smith Alumnae Quarterly*, August, pp. 195-197

Stevenson, Anne. (1984) 'Anne Stevenson Writes', *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, pp 184-89

----- (1989) 'Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind', *Poetry Review*, 79:2, pp. 10-14

----- (1990) *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* 1989, London: Penguin

----- (1996/1997) 'Sylvia Plath's Word Games', *Poetry Review*, 86:4, pp. 28-34

Still, J. and M. Worton, eds. (1990) *Intertextuality: Theories and Practises*, New York; Manchester: Manchester UP

Stout, J. P. (1988) 'Breaking Out: The Journey of the American Woman Poet', *North Dakota Quarterly*, Winter 56:1, pp. 40-53

Suleiman, S. R., ed. (1986) *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard UP

Thompson, C. (1990-91) "'Dawn Poems in Blood": Sylvia Plath and PMS', *Triquarterly*, 80, pp.221-249

Tomalin, C. (1994) 'Everything But the Truth', *The Independent on Sunday*, October 9, pp. 32-33

Toth, S. A. (1981) *Blooming: A Small Town Girlhood 1978*, Boston: Little

----- (1984) *Ivy Days: Making My Way Out East*, Boston: Little

Tripp, A. (1994) 'Saying "I": Sylvia Plath as Tragic Author or Feminist Text?', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 5:3, pp. 253-263

Uroff, M. D. (1979) *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Urbana;
London: U of Illinois

Valentine, J. (1992) 'Poem to Plath, to Sexton', *The Literary Review*, Fall 36, p. 38

Van Dyne, S. (1982) "'More Terrible Than She Ever Was": The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems', *Stings: Original Drafts of the Poem in Facsimile*, Northampton, Mass.: Smith College Library Rare Book Room

----- (1988) Rekindling the past in Sylvia Plath's 'Burning the Letters', *The Centennial Review*, Summer 32:3, pp. 250-265

----- (1993) *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*, Chapel Hill; London: U of North Carolina

Vendler, H. (1988) *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets and Critics*, Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard UP

Wagner, L. W. (1983) 'Sylvia Plath's Journals', *Contemporary Literature*, Winter 24, pp. 521-3

----- ed. (1984a) *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*, Boston: Hall

----- (1984b) 'Plath's Ladies' Home Journal Syndrome', *Journal of American Culture*, Spr/Sum, pp. 32-38

- (1985) 'Sylvia Plath's Specialness in her Short Stories', *Journal of Narrating Technique*, Winter 15:1, pp. 1-14
- (1986) 'Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman', *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 12:1, pp. 55-68
- ed. (1988) *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage Series*, London: Routledge
- Wagner-Martin, L. W. (1990) *Sylvia Plath* 1988, London: Sphere
- Wakeling, P. (1991) 'Sylvia Plath, A Balance of Loss and Gain', *Contemporary Review*, 259, pp.142-46
- Walters, M. (1978) *The Nude Male: A New Perspective*, London: Paddington
- Warren, C. A. B. (1987) *Madwives: Schizophrenic Women in the 1950s*, New Brunswick; London: Rutgers UP
- Weart, S. R. (1988) *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard UP
- White, C. L. (1970) *Women's Magazines 1693-1968*, London: Joseph
- (1977) *The Woman's Periodical Press in Britain 1946-1976*, London: HMSO

Whitfield, S. J. (1991) *The Culture of the Cold War*, Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins UP

Williamson, J. (1985) *Consuming Passions: The Dynamics of Popular Culture*, London: Boyars

----- (1991) *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* 1978, London: Boyars

Wilson, S. (1990) 'Dark Corners, On Poetry and Melancholy', *Encounter*, 74:3, pp.43-46

Winkler, A. M. (1993) *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Cold War*, New York: Oxford UP

Winship, J. (1987) *Inside Women's Magazines*, London: Routledge

Wood, D. (1984) 'Everything You Wanted to Know About Suicide! *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath', *Kyushu American Literature*, July 25, pp. 7-17

----- (1988) 'Sylvia Plath's Biography: A Review', *Kyushu American Literature*, 29, pp. 51-55

Woolf, V. (1952) *Three Guineas* 1938, London: Hogarth

Yorke, L. (1991) *Impertinent Voices: Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Women's Poetry*, London: Routledge

Young, J. E. (1988) *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*, Bloomington: Indiana UP

Zarin, C. (1990) 'Forensic Biography', *The Yale Review*, Spring 79, pp.446-466

Zivley, S. L. (1982) 'Ted Hughes's Apologia Pro Matrimonio Suo', *The New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters*, 55:2, pp.187-200

Women's Magazines

Seventeen. (1950) August
Seventeen. (1953a) January
Seventeen. (1953b) March
Seventeen. (1955a) October
Seventeen. (1955b) November
Seventeen. (1956a) January
Seventeen. (1956b) February
Seventeen. (1956c) March
Seventeen. (1956d) May
Seventeen. (1956e) December
Seventeen. (1963) February
Seventeen. (1994) October

Mademoiselle. (1949a) August
Mademoiselle. (1949b) September

Mademoiselle. (1952a) February

Mademoiselle. (1952b) June

Mademoiselle. (1952c) August

Mademoiselle. (1953) August

Mademoiselle. (1958) January

Mademoiselle. (1959) January

Mademoiselle. (1963) May

Ladies' Home Journal. (1949) January

Ladies' Home Journal. (1951) October

Ladies' Home Journal. (1952a) January

Ladies' Home Journal. (1952b) March

Ladies' Home Journal. (1952c) May

Ladies' Home Journal. (1952d) July

Ladies' Home Journal. (1855) July

Ladies' Home Journal. (1956a) July

Ladies' Home Journal. (1956b) August

Ladies' Home Journal. (1956c) October

Ladies' Home Journal. (1958) January

Ladies' Home Journal. (1960) July

Ladies' Home Journal. (1963) February